

# **REVIVED**

**A REMNANTS OF ANOTHER LIFE NOVEL**

**DIANA LESTON**

# Copyright

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Revived | Book 2 | Remnants Of Another Life

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Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data:

Names: Leston, Diana, 1980- author. Title: Revived: Remnants Of Another Life Number 2/Diana Leston. Description: Self-Published [2019] | Series: Remnants Of Another Life; 2 | Identifiers: USCO# 2158281 | ISBN 978-1-7334293-0-6 (6x9) | BISAC: FICTION/Action & Adventure/Fantasy. | FICTION/Action & Adventure/Romance. | FICTION: Action & Adventure/Science Fiction. | FICTION: Action & Adventure/War & Military. | FICTION: Science Fiction & Fantasy/Superheroes. | FICTION: Science Fiction & Fantasy/Fantasy/Paranormal & Urban/Paranormal. | FICTION: Science Fiction & Fantasy/Romantic. | FICTION: Romance/Werewolves & Shifters. | FICTION: Romance/Paranormal/General. | FICTION: Romance/Military.

Cover Images

Male model Image (Karl):

© JennLeBlanc | Illustrated Romance.com

- 20120722-Romance-09-JKL-\_0861

Female model Images (unknown):

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- MGCWLDR63

- DRKPRSTSS87

## Acknowledgments

As always, I would like to thank Jake Decker from JD Cover Designs on the beautiful cover.

[www.jakedeckerdesign.com](http://www.jakedeckerdesign.com)

I would also like to thank and praise my Beta Reader, Maria Fernandez, for all of her hard work in perfecting this series behind the scenes.

Finally, I'd like to send some love to the readers. This series wouldn't exist if it weren't for you. Thank you. I appreciate your ongoing feedback, your love, and support.

## **Dedication**

*Dedicated to: Michael, Cristian & Carmen.*

*Thank you for your love and support.*

## Glossary Of Terms

**Alpha:** Leader of a wolf demon pack. This distinct title is earned by defeating an existing Alpha in battle, or by becoming the mate of one who already holds the title.

**Anamnesis Terrene** (also referred to as *The Queen's Heart*): Heart-shaped ruby with the ability to revive the dead. The jewel was affectionately named after the deceased Queen of the Dog Demons, who traded her life for its power. The Anamnesis Terrene can call a soul back from the afterlife only once. To be used, the host body must be in a survivable condition. If a soul is called back into a damaged body that cannot support life, the person will die once again. Healers are usually on hand at the time the gem is used.

**Angels** (also referred to as *The Pure*): Supernatural beings that serve the creators (or gods). Angels endowed select humans with their pure energy for the protection of humanity from demons that would harm them. Angels only exist in spirit form and will not directly involve themselves in Earthly matters.

**Beta:** Title bestowed by the Alpha. Those serving as Betas are the second in command of the pack.

**Bloodlust:** State brought on by extreme mental or physical anguish. Bloodlust is usually marked by a warped animalistic physical state, along with visible and suffocating aura. Demons that fall into bloodlust lose all semblances of reason and sanity and act as savage beasts, becoming a danger to all around them.

**The Celestial:** Demons or Holy Users with almost God-like power.

**Demon** (also referred to as *The Tainted*): Supernatural beings with the ability to use dark energy. Demons take on human forms, and, depending on the species, can live for thousands of years. When humanity took control of Earth, demons hid within society.

**Dog Demon** (also referred to as *Hellhounds* or *Cadejos* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true nature of a dog. The size of the dog is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command dogs. Known for their aloof personalities, although they are rumored to have a soft spot for humans.

**Fox Demon** (also referred to as *Sprites* or *Fairies* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true nature of a fox. The size of the fox is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command foxes. Known for their mischievous nature and shapeshifting abilities.

**The Gifted** (also referred to as *The Corrupted*): Evolved humans employing supernatural powers who are a direct result of centuries worth of human and demon lineage. Humanity is unaware of the role demonic blood plays in this evolutionary state.

**Holy User** (also referred to as *The Chosen*): Pureblooded humans with the power to use pure energy. Abilities were given by the heavens in exchange for the protection of humanity from demons

that would harm them. As demons have lengthy lifespans, Holy Users are reincarnated to allow for the continuance of their divine mission. At present, due to the widespread appearance of gifted beings, Holy Users have become an endangered species.

**Hybrid:** Child born from a full-blooded demon and a full-blooded human. Hybrids have stronger powers than those with diluted demonic blood (e.g., *The Gifted*). Purification powers harm, but cannot kill, a Hybrid.

**Marking Scent:** Wolf Demon term used to describe potent pheromones that are secreted through the skin. Marking scents warn potential rivals that a partner is taken and off-limits. This scent is so powerful that it is distinguishable by humans. The distinct scent is appealing to members of the opposite sex, but dreadful to those of the same.

**Mating:** Wolf Demon term used to describe the instinctual claiming of a partner. Only mated pairs can reproduce.

**Mating Ceremony:** Wolf Demon ceremony that celebrates a mated pairing. A Mating Ceremony is usually reserved for higher-ranking wolf demons.

**Resonance:** The process by which Holy Users relive their most recent past life through vivid dreams. Each nightly session unlocks a similar point in time in their former life for the purpose of enlightenment and training.



**ROOT:** Secret organization founded in 1945 for the protection of world peace. Heavily employs *Humans*, *Holy Users*, *Demons*, and *The Gifted* for this purpose.

**UNI-chip:** Small device implanted behind the right ear that allows for fluency in all known human languages. Developed by *ROOT's* technology department in 1980, this hardware is a requirement for employment and is inserted at the time of signage. Upon retirement, defection, or death, the device is electronically rendered unusable by the organization.

**Wolf Demon** (also referred to as *Werewolves* or *Wolf Spirits* in non-Asian cultures): Demons with the true form of a wolf. The size of the wolf is dependent upon the demon's bloodline and power. Can speak to and command wolves. Known for their predatory and harsh natures.

## Prologue

1400 A.D.

The full moon bathed the sacred mourning grounds of the dog demons in its serene, white glow. Looking upon it, Hakai thought the arrival of his people's revered planetary beacon couldn't have been more appropriate.

Tearing his eyes away, he forced himself to look at the funeral pyre holding the body of his beloved mother.

Even in death, the woman was absolutely beautiful, and in the moon's soft light, he swore she actually glowed. Her body was posed with her hands over her chest, and she looked as though she were only taking a brief respite.

However, knowing his mother was very much dead and was in that state because of her own choosing incited a deep fury. Additionally, understanding that her hands were positioned solely to hide the gaping hole in her chest tainted his admiration of her.

Lady Anamnesis had once been the undisputed Queen of the dog demons. And although their people remained scattered throughout the country, not one of their species refused to bow down to her will. She was an ancient being of celestial power and the sole gatekeeper to the underworld, answering only to the gods themselves.

*Or, at least she used to be before she lost her way.*

Frowning in disgust, Hakai forced his gaze away from his mother. "Send her off," he commanded to Lythe, his most trusted attendant, as he stormed away from the ritual.

The woman attempted to follow him.

"But, Lord Hakai, *you* must be the one to light the fire."

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Lythe watched her Lord abruptly turn, snatching a torch from one of the attending mourner's hands. He then marched furiously back to his mother's pyre and with purposeful carelessness, flung the burning wood under her temporary resting place.

With an air of indifference, he exited the clearing, never once turning to observe his mother's final exit from the physical world.

The disrespectful display from Lady Anamnesis' only son truly broke her heart.

*I pray that with time, he'll come to understand, my Lady.*

However, she hoped that one day, she, too, could understand why her treasured matriarch chose to end her life on account of a human man.

Lythe fought the urge to wrinkle her nose in disgust.

Lady Anamnesis had been grieving the loss of her human lover for the past month. In her state of mourning, the once all-powerful Queen was reduced to nothing more than a shell of her former self. The Queen never left her bed, nor would she eat. It was as if she were willing herself to die in a disgusting attempt to reunite with the object of her affections.

Apparently, when starving herself while wallowing in self-pity wasn't executing her objective as quickly as she would have liked, she became a bit more assertive. And yesterday evening, Hakai found her lifeless body in her chambers. It appeared Lady Anamnesis had ripped her heart from her chest with her once graceful, clawed hands.

It was utterly heartbreaking for all to hear this news. But Lythe knew her people were spared the real tragedy. Hakai, on the other hand, would have to live with the terrible memory for the remainder of his very long life. And it was this knowledge that saddened her more than the news of her Queen's passing ever could. She just hoped her Lord's fiery and passionate heart wouldn't freeze over due to the suffering he was now forced to endure over her loss.

Hakai loved his mother more than anything in this world, and now she was gone.

Sighing, Lythe reached into her robe and pulled out the ruby-red jewel found clenched in Lady Anamnesis' lifeless hand. The gem was in the shape of a heart, and it sparkled in the shadows of the night. From time-to-time, the stone would glow as if feeling emotion in its own right. With just one touch of its jagged edges, one could tell the gem embodied incredible power. However, no one yet understood how to use it.

If Lythe had to guess, the jewel was the direct result of a sordid deal between Lady Anamnesis and the gods. The Queen, being so obsessed with seeing her lover again, likely traded her life for the power to somehow reunite with him.

Also, Lady Anamnesis' real heart hadn't yet been found. The missing organ, in conjunction with the jewel's appearance, seemed too much of a coincidence for anyone involved in the secret details to casually brush away.

*Dearest Queen, I pray that in death, you are finally able to find what you so truly desired.*

## Chapter 1

2018 A.D.

An oppressive silence blanketed Hashima Island, only interrupted by the occasional massive wave as it crashed against the beach. The typical symphony of life usually in the background of any given place was harshly absent here. And the lack of a moon in the sky added to the oppressive nature of the surroundings, covering the area in thick, black ink.

In an attempt to maintain his sanity, Renji, codenamed Fang, tried to focus solely on his enhanced sense of smell.

There were three wolves fanned out from his location on the shore, each taking nine o'clock, twelve o'clock and three o'clock positions. He sent the animals out almost an hour ago and was now anxiously awaiting their return.

To prevent his mind from wandering, he closed his eyes. Only a few more minutes passed before the scent of the wolves became stronger, communicating their return.

The animals surrounded him silently and upon his signal, came forth, lowly growling and reporting their findings.

*The enemy location is twenty minutes north from my current position. The entrance is being guarded by one human male who's armed with, what looks to be, the same lightweight MK-48 machine gun we use. There's a mix of two other human scents in the air; one male and one female. This second set of scents is most likely coming from inside the hideout. There are no other findings east or west, he mentally translated.*

This information brought the authoritative female voice of his leader forth into his mind.

*Quake, Terrain, and Trace, I'm sending you three out first. I want you to take out the guard at the entrance discreetly. Meet up with Fang at his location. Fang, once they get there, have the wolves escort them to the enemy hideout. The rest of us will catch up with you, and we'll go together to take out the enemy inside. Remember, the female is a hostage, and we need her alive.*

A shared, 'understood,' came through the mental connection before it was once again replaced by silence.

Mere minutes passed before his first three teammates exited their hiding place from the ocean and silently fell in line behind him. In response, he growled to the wolves that were watching him intently.

*They understand that they are to take you,* he explained to the small group.

Agents Quake, Terrain, and Trace nodded, following the wolves into the dense vegetation.

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*Why do we keep getting all the shit missions lately?* Frisk absentmindedly asked as he, Mystic, and Amari made their way out of the water and over to Renji's hidden location on the beach. *Any other team could be handling this right now.*

Amari rolled her blue eyes and prayed for patience. *This isn't the time, Frisk. I need you to focus.*

ROOT was going through a frantic restructuring process over the past six months. The organization was short on resources due to a recent internal conspiracy. As dirty agents were flushed from their organization, all internal departments became short-staffed as a result. The Human Resources Department was scrambling to recruit new members. However, it was going to take time to fill in the gaps. In the interim, the remaining staff was forced to pick up the slack, resulting in the infamous Alpha Team taking on fieldwork typically assigned to lower-ranking teams.

Alpha Team leader, Amari, codenamed Wraith, didn't mind the more straightforward tasks as of late. Her team had just taken Renji and six wolves on as new members, and the easier missions served the valuable purpose of training that otherwise wouldn't have been possible.

Overall, the unit worked very well together, with exception to a few ongoing personality issues between Frisk and Renji. Otherwise, he immediately fit in with the group and was very well-liked and respected. The wolf pack he commanded followed his instructions seamlessly. However, the animals still had a long way to go to become fully desensitized to humans, machinery, and weaponry.

*Do all seven of us and three dogs really need to be here to take out two enemies?* Frisk pushed.

*They aren't dogs!* Renji hissed, as usual, taking the obvious bait.

*You're right. Dogs would've been a much better choice, much easier to train and a lot more loyal. Why don't you try using them instead?*

The heat of Renji's anger washed over the group through their shared psychic connection in response.

*Fang, don't give in to senseless taunting. You really want to get to Frisk? Ignore him. I know it's a lot easier said than done.* Amari approached and chanced a glance at his face.

Her mate was tall, lean, and muscled. His vibrant, yellow eyes were the color of heated gold, and they almost glowed against the backdrop of his tanned skin and angled features. His long, onyx hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, the length of it swaying in the night's warm breeze. Even when angrily scowling, to her, he was utterly beautiful.

*Ignoring me is impossible. I'm way too annoying,* Frisk proudly interjected as their group set off with Renji leading the way by scent. *What's the lead dog's name again?*

*The alpha wolf is named Kiba,* Mystic supplied.

He seemed to turn this information over in his head before broadly smiling. A few minutes went by as the group made their way through the thick jungle-like vegetation before his voice came through their consciousness again.

*Kiba means 'fang' in Japanese, doesn't it?*

Amari frowned. *Shut up! You're really pushing it now.*

Frisk snickered but remained silent, saving whatever joke he just came up with for another day.

*Who is this hostage anyway?* Renji asked.

*She's the daughter of a British politician who's been missing for months and was presumed dead. However, the Intelligence Department's facial recognition software spotted her in Nagasaki along with two hooded men today. Apparently, they procured a small boat and were headed in the direction of this uninhabited island,* Amari answered.

The team continued to travel in silence before the thoughts of the first group came into their consciousness.

*We're in position and have visual on the first target, who, by the way, is freaking massive!* Trace excitedly alerted. *Terrain is going to create a small distraction, and then Quake is going to try using a chokehold. Hopefully, he goes down without any trouble.*

*Sounds good. Everyone have your stun guns ready as plan B. Try to avoid killing him unless you really have to. The Interrogation Department will want to speak with him,* Amari instructed. *Regardless, make sure whatever you end up doing is silent.*  
*Understood,* came the collective reply.

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Terrain's steel, gray eyes observed the small, makeshift hut from her hidden position in the trees. No lighting emanated from the inside of the structure, and her surroundings were fully dark. But, there was a faint outline of a huge man with a machine gun lurking at the entrance.

Stealthily, she filled her palm with some of the small rocks and pebbles strewn about. Once armed, she snuck off through the trees. As she made her way to the left of the guard, Kiba, Fang's gray alpha wolf, silently followed behind her.

When she finally got to the other side of the hideout, she threw one rock against the wall of the hut. The stone made a small clicking sound which didn't capture the guard's attention. Frowning, she tried again. Throwing two larger rocks this time, she made a slightly louder noise.

The resulting 'pop' quickly prompted the guard over to investigate.

Terrain watched Quake silently exit his hidden place from within the trees and sneak up behind their target.

The olive-skinned, brown-haired, brown-eyed agent could have been considered a giant amongst their team. Able to manipulate the very earth they stood upon, he was built hard, just like the element he commanded. With combat boots on, he topped out at about six foot eight inches. He was a man of few words and incredibly deadly, preferring to kill with his fists if given a choice.



When the guard turned to return to his post, Quake didn't waste any time in wrapping his thick, muscled arm around his neck, compressing his jugular.

Usually, on a smaller opponent, the move went down smoothly. But today, mostly due to the hulking size of the guard, a struggle ensued.

Bending at the waist, the guard used his full weight to haul him over his back.

*Shit!*

Terrain and Trace ran over and flanked the guard.

*On the count of three, let go, and we'll both stun him,* Terrain ordered. Readying her weapon, she began to count down. *One. Two. Three!*

Quake released his hold and rolled out of the way, while Trace and Terrain simultaneously prodded the guard's sides with their stun guns.

He wasn't going down.

*We need more juice!* Trace spat.

Drawing his own stun gun, Quake hurriedly thrust the weapon into the man's back.

The additional voltage helped, and the guard's eyes soon rolled behind his lids. After several seconds, the team exchanged glances and released their weapons.

Stepping forward, Quake once again slithered his arm around the man's neck, patiently waiting for him to lose complete consciousness.

However, the guard's eyes slowly began to return to focus.

*What the fuck is going on here? He won't go down!* Quake's usually calm voice was thick with panic.

*We're here! Try to hold on, Quake!* Wraith interrupted. *Fang, Frisk, Mystic, we have a change of plans. I need you three to break into the hideout now and take down the guard inside. It's dark in there, so follow Fang. He'll identify the male scent for your group.*

*Got it!* Fang ran at God's speed to the entrance of the hut. Standing within a foot of the threshold, he effortlessly kicked the door in while Mystic and Frisk scrambled to keep up with him. *The male scent will be on our left. The female scent is in the middle of the room.*

As Fang's group entered the hut, Wraith approached Quake and pulled her twelve-inch Marine knife from its holster. Cutting the strap tethering the guard's machine gun to his shoulder, she removed the weapon, placed it on the floor, and kicked it away. She then wedged her knife against a sliver of exposed skin beneath Quake's arm, using two hands to anchor it in place.

*Let go!* she commanded.

When he released his hold, she twisted her body, pulling the knife around with her, resulting in a deep and forceful slash against the man's neck.

All could hear a loud popping sound as the blade severed cartilage. A geyser of blood accompanied the noise as it sprayed outward, bathing the team.

Seemingly unperturbed by the fatal injury, the guard took two heavy steps forward and roughly grabbed Wraith by the neck, lifting her off the ground.

*What the fuck is wrong with this guy?* Quake grabbed the man's hands, trying to break his hold.

Drawing her Glock, Terrain positioned it against the side of the guard's head. *I'm going to shoot, no one get in the way!* she shouted, before pulling the trigger.

The bullet to the skull succeeded in releasing the guard's grip, and he crumpled to the ground in a messy heap.

Stepping forward, Terrain smoothly managed to catch her leader before she faceplanted on the ground. *Wraith! Are you okay?*

*Yes, I'm fine,* she sputtered as she struggled to catch her breath. *I don't...*

A rustling sound from the ground interrupted her, pulling their small group's attention back to the guard. The team watched in horror as he attempted to right himself.

*Are you fucking kidding me? This isn't fucking possible!* Trace released his firearm, approached the enemy, and in the same fashion as Terrain, shot the man point-blank in the head.

The guard once again collapsed, momentarily lying on the ground before shakily moving to right himself.

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The moment the door gave way, Renji headed straight for the guard on his left. Jumping high in the air, he delivered a powerful kick into the enemy's torso. As the man stumbled backward, he released his sharp claws and charged, attempting to force his hand through the man's chest.

*Wraith! Are you okay?*

Out of all the collective thoughts he heard from the team outside, it was these four words in conjunction with the sound of an earlier shot being fired that shattered his concentration.

He paid for the momentary distraction when the enemy quickly righted and pushed his newfound momentum into him, landing a hard punch directly against his temple.

The edges of Renji's vision became fuzzy as he was flung against the wall of the hut.

*Yes, I'm fine.*

Taking a deep breath, he absorbed Amari's words, while shaking his head a few times to correct his blurry eyesight. Once his vision cleared, he noticed Frisk protectively came to stand between him and the enemy, and his Glock was aimed straight at the man's head.

"One more step and I'll shoot," Frisk drawled in warning.

But the man paid no mind. In one swift move, he removed a military-grade hunting knife from his belt and tackled him to the floor.

Rushing forward, Renji got behind the enemy and snaked his claws around his throat. In one short burst, he tore his hands away, smoothly ripping the guard's trachea out in the process.

The man reacted by suddenly turning. Sweeping his knife with the movement, he tried to slash his chest.

Thankfully, it was a movement his superior wolf demon reflexes easily allowed him to dodge.

*Um. Should he be able to do that?* Frisk aimed his Glock at the guard's head and fired.

The man crumpled upon the ground.

Both agents collectively gasped when the guard shakily attempted to right himself.

\*\*\*

Mystic quickly made her way to the woman tied up in the center of the room while trying to ignore the male fighting going on in the corner. Removing her knife from her vest, she cut through the rope tethering the woman's hands and feet.

"Don't worry, we're going to get you out of here. We're taking you home," she promised.

Once finally free of the bindings, the woman made no effort to move.

"It's time to go, honey. You're free now. You need to come with me. I'm here to help you." She waited for a response that did not come. "Hey, are you okay?"

Freeing her flashlight from her utility belt, she shined the small light on the woman's face.

The hostage wasn't blinking; her dilated eyes were wide and horrified as she stared down at the floor.

*Something's seriously wrong with this chick, she warned. We might need to carry her.*

Intending to pull her to her feet, she gently grabbed hold of her hand. At the contact, the woman's emotions came flooding into her mind, along with a horrific feeling of terror she never experienced before.

A piercing scream came forth, overtaking her hearing. Several seconds passed before Mystic realized the sound was coming from her own throat. Panicking, she tried to let go of the woman's hand. But, her body wouldn't respond to her command.

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All members of Alpha Team clutched their heads.

The sound of Mystic's screaming and her current state of terror was flooding through their minds. With all the noise she was making, speaking through the mental connection was now impossible.

Springing into action, Quake promptly took off to go to her.

"Wait!" Wraith called after him. However, her attention was recaptured by the guard, who successfully righted himself. "Open fire on this asshole!" she ordered to her remaining group.

Over the loud chaos in their minds, Trace, Terrain, and Wraith began to empty their clips into the guard's head.

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Hearing the shooting spree now taking place outside, Frisk happily followed suit, firing upon the enemy who continued in his attempts to stand.

"Kill his ass!" he shouted to Fang over the terror flooding his mind.

Quickly releasing his Urbana rifle from his shoulder, the wolf demon flanked him. He chose to fire upon the man's heart, as Frisk was already going to town on his head.

Several shots were fired by both men before the enemy finally stayed down. However, his body continued to twitch.

"Is he a zombie?" Fang hollered as Quake burst into the hut.

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The moment Quake noticed Mystic's form in the center of the room, he dropped to his knees and pulled her into a tight, protective embrace.

Her soft features were twisted in horror against the backdrop of her olive-skin, her warm green eyes hidden behind tightly closed lids. Her petite body was trembling violently in his arms, and God help him, he had no clue what to do. Trying to beat back his own hysteria, he placed his large hand on her cheek and began whispering, hoping to soothe her.

"Cut the connection," he gently said into her ear. His free hand tried to smooth her long, silver hair back from her face. "I'm right here, baby. Feel *me*. Feel *my* emotions and take them. You're safe with me. Sense my feelings." He kissed her forehead and rocked her slowly, holding her to his heart. "You *need* to cut the connection, Mystic."

Thankfully, he seemed to get through to her, and the entire team's shared psychic connection cut off, an empty silence replacing the former hysterical screaming.

He chanced a quick glance at the hostage.

The woman's expression was horror-stricken. She remained wide-eyed and unblinking as she continued to stare blankly at the floor.

She gave him the creeps.

When Mystic began to sob, he picked her up bridal style. She was shuddering against him as if she were freezing cold, which sent his protective nature into overdrive.

He needed to get her out of there.

Turning away from the hostage, he sprinted out of the hut.

## Chapter 2

"Hey! Where are you going?" Frisk shouted in disbelief as Quake blew out of the room. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

Renji sighed. He completely understood Quake's feelings. He was currently fighting against his own instincts not to run outside and check on Amari. "I'll go get the hostage."

Abandoning his study of the twitching guard, he sauntered over to the woman in the center of the room. He stopped only to give her a quick once over.

*She actually looks like a zombie.* He grabbed her and slung her over his shoulder.

It was at this moment that Amari ran into the hut, shining her flashlight around as she took inventory of the current occupants. Her expression fell into one of worry as she looked him over.

"I'm fine," he promised as he also attempted to examine her. "Are *you* okay?"

Her long, raven hair, which was always pulled into a tight bun, was now disheveled. The flecks of white that occupied her dark blue eyes gave off a worried, reflective glow. Her delicate, porcelain skin was slightly flushed, and her lean frame was tight, her muscles wound from apparent stress.

Nodding, his woman met his eyes briefly before walking over to inspect the enemy twitching at Frisk's feet.

"He just won't die," Frisk said, fascinated.

"We have a similar situation outside," she bit out.

"Is Mystic alright?"

"I wouldn't know. Quake took off with her like a bat out of hell. He's most likely making his way back to the boats without us."

Sensing her anger, Renji came up behind her and squeezed her hand.

"This is why intergroup relationships are a bad idea," Frisk chided. "They get in the way of clear decision making."

He frowned. "If it weren't for Quake's relationship with Mystic, she'd probably still be screaming like a maniac right now, and we'd all have that raw fear running through our minds. That would be

a *real* threat to our clear collective decision making now, wouldn't it?"

Alpha Team's second in command shot him a dirty look before making a point to stare at his and Amari's entwined hands. "Are you guys on a date right now or a mission?" he asked with mock innocence, before leaving to join the balance of the team outside.

Feeling a wave of anger wash over him, he fought the urge to bare his teeth.

If things continued this way, he was eventually going to lose his temper. Frisk was his superior in terms of ranking, and assaulting a superior would be a sure-fire way to get permanently suspended from the team.

Amari released his hand as she set off to join the group outside. "Just ignore him."

"At some point, that may become impossible," he admitted as he followed her.

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"Terrain, I want you to call the Medical Research Department. Let them know we're bringing them two dead bodies and one hostage. Give a quick synopsis of what's going on with the two enemies. I'm sure they're going to want to take a look at them."

"Will do, boss." Removing her phone from her pocket, the fit woman with short brown hair and smooth, ebony skin walked off to make the call.

"Frisk, try to get some information out of him." Amari pointed to the man on the ground. "If you can't get anything off this guy, go and try the one inside."

Frisk's face twisted in disgust. Kneeling down, he removed his gloves and placed his hands on what was left of the guard's face. "Nothing's coming through," he grumbled, before taking off to try again on the second man inside.

"Trace, I'm sorry, but when Terrain gets back, can you two drag this guy back to the boats?" Amari asked. "Make sure you thoroughly disarm him. Frisk and I will drag the second guy and catch up to you. Proceed as if you're expecting an enemy attack."



"Yes, ma'am," the tall, lean man with short brown hair and gunmetal gray eyes replied.

Amari finally turned her attention to Renji. "Fang, please send the wolves off to follow Quake. Though I doubt it, we all need to proceed as if enemy reinforcements might show up, and I don't want him out there by himself." She then set off to join Frisk.

Renji sniffed the air and approached the trees to the right of the makeshift hideout. Growling lowly, he gave his wolves their new instructions before returning to Trace and Terrain. He watched as they hoisted the twitching guard onto their shoulders before setting off.

Amari and Frisk weren't too far behind. In another moment, they exited the hut hauling the body of the second enemy on their shoulders in a similar fashion. As they approached, he followed them into the woods.

"Were you able to get anything?" he curiously asked Frisk.

"Not a thing. They're both blank. It's as if they're dead. They don't have a pulse or much of a brain left, but their bodies keep moving anyway. It's really bizarre. That obviously shouldn't be possible."

"Maybe you should try probing the hostage."

"Negative," Amari responded in Frisk's stead. "Something about her set Mystic off, and I don't want the same thing happening to Frisk."

"But, they have different sensory abilities. Mystic is a psychic and a clairvoyant, she operates by feel. From what I gather, Frisk just mentally rapes people, stealing their experiences and making them his own," Renji sarcastically responded.

"Yup, that pretty much sums up my abilities. Thank you so much for clearing that up. It makes me very happy to know you've taken such an interest in me," Frisk cheerfully replied, much to his annoyance.

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"Look, I need you both to be quiet," Amari hissed. "Let's not speak out loud about our team's abilities. We don't know who might be listening."

This simple rescue mission had quickly turned into a fiasco, with two members of the group taking off against orders. The last thing she wanted was another problem rearing its ugly head because the team became too comfortable in their surroundings.

"Stop letting your guard down," she instructed the men. *Lately, this group has become way too cocky.*

The balance of the walk to the shore was made in absolute silence. Twenty minutes passed before the remainder of the team came into sight, all lined up on the beach.

Apparently, Quake made himself useful in his absence as the two boats they'd hidden alongside the coast were now docked in front of them.

Making her way over to him, Amari noticed Mystic was still in his arms. "When we get back, we need to talk," she whispered.

He lowered his head upon her approach, but his eyes never left Mystic's face. "Understood."

"Quake, Mystic, Frisk, and Terrain, take one enemy and two wolves with you into one of the boats. Fang, Trace, and I will take everyone else," she ordered as the team split up. "If anything happens, use your radios to communicate."

"Yes, boss!" Frisk cheerfully answered. "Is Fang Jr. going in your boat or in mine?"

She quizzically studied him before he pointed to the gray alpha wolf coming forth onto the beach.

"For fuck's sake, Frisk. Would you please shut up?" Terrain shouted. "What's gotten into you today? You're worse than usual. Geez."

Kiba happily followed Renji and the female hostage he was carrying into the boat, making his own decision in the matter.

"Looks like it's settled then," Trace muttered. Following closely behind Kiba, he dragged the twitching guard into the boat.

When Renji growled, two brown wolves came forward and entered Frisk's boat.

Amari was the last to board before they took off to the mainland, where her team would be catching a plane back to their base in South Korea. As she briefly looked over her teammates, she realized Renji was rubbing his head as if in pain. Kiba was at his side, worriedly studying his master.

She shuffled over to him. "How's your head?"

Renji was doing very well communicating via the shared psychic link. However, he was still new to it, and it usually left him with splitting headaches. She noticed he could go longer and longer stretches lately. But, it often took about a year to master the connection without the lingering physical effects. Since he had only been working with the group for the past five months, he still had a ways to go before he'd be left unaffected.

"It's killing me," he admitted. "I can't wait to take a few aspirins and have a nap on the plane." His arm wrapped around her back, and he took a deep pull of her scent. "It's more so due to dealing with Frisk's bullshit than the mental connection this time around. That guy really is an asshole."

"He's always, admittedly, been a huge pain in the ass. But, something's going on with him lately. He's usually never *this* bad. I plan on having a talk with him when we get back." She leaned over and placed a kiss against his throbbing temple. "I'll take care of it."

"Is Quake in trouble?" he asked, changing the subject.

"You bet your ass he is. I can understand his feelings. But, he totally took off on us, putting him and Mystic in danger. That's unacceptable."

"I wonder what Mystic saw in this girl's head." Trace studied the female sitting in the middle of their boat that was staring at the floor. "That reaction was so unlike her."

"I know," she agreed, sympathizing. "We all shared in her feelings. That was terrible. It had to be so much worse for Mystic. She must have seen something pretty bad."

"Can you speak?" Trace asked, attempting to engage the female hostage.

The woman made no visible response to the question.

*She gives me the creeps,* Amari thought.

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Upon entering the small private plane, Trace and Frisk unceremoniously dumped the two twitching guards on the floor near the cockpit, tying the bodies together securely.

After Renji gently placed the female hostage in the second row, Terrain tried to offer her some water, but the woman remained entirely motionless and in a stupor.

As the rest of the members fanned out to find their seats, Renji dove into his own, reclining the chair and slinging an arm over his eyes. His three wolves configured themselves around and under him.

Although tempted to take her seat next to him, Amari had to do some much-needed damage control instead.

"Mystic?" she softly said as she approached the middle aisle. She knelt down and delicately took the woman's hand.

The psychic's eyes were red and swollen as she looked up at her.

*Poor thing. She looks like she's been through hell,* she thought.

"Are you alright?" she whispered, trying to make her voice as soothing as possible.

"Not, really, but I'll be okay." She attempted a reassuring smile before her thoughts abruptly cut straight through Amari's mind. *Please don't suspend Quake. I needed his help; he was only trying to protect me.*

"Do you want to talk about what you saw?" Amari tried to push on with the verbal conversation noticing the others were now listening out of concern for Mystic's wellbeing. *I'm not going to suspend him, but I do need to put him on probation,* she mentally answered. *I get it, more so now than ever before. I truly understand how he feels. But, he abandoned the team tonight. He didn't even tell anyone where he was going. That's something Frisk, and I will need to take up with him.*

"Not now," Mystic sputtered. "I don't understand everything I saw. Honestly, I don't even want to try to remember any of those visions any time soon," she admitted before once again speaking into Amari's mind. *This is my fault. I'm to blame. I lost all control. If anyone should be in trouble, it should be me. I'm so very sorry, Wraith.*

"I completely understand. When you do feel you're able to share something with me, please do. I'd like to know what's going on with that woman, and I'm sure *ROOT* is going to want to know as well." She pointed to the hostage's seat towards the front of the plane. "She seriously freaks me out," she whispered. *It's going to be okay. Please*

*try not to worry. You've been through enough already. I want you to rest now.*

"She *should* freak you out. That woman is dangerous and should be treated as a threat. Warn the Medical Research team, the Interrogation squad, or whoever the fuck has to deal with her, not to make skin-on-skin contact and to guard their thoughts. She's a psychic, and she's dangerous," Mystic muttered, before squeezing her eyes closed.

Amari felt her skin prickle up in goosebumps as a chill made its way up her spine. "Let's talk first thing in the morning then." When she released Mystic's hand, she felt their shared mental connection go dead.

*Fucking creepy*, she thought as she now made a beeline for the vacant chair next to Frisk. She needed to talk to him about his ongoing behavior. Luckily, his seat was toward the back of the plane, offering them much more privacy than she was afforded with Mystic.

As she plopped down next to him, he looked her over skeptically. "Fighting with your boyfriend?"

"No, I'm actually fighting with my second in command right now, but the dummy hasn't figured it out yet."

Rolling his head back, he closed his eyes. "Can we fight later, Rai?" I'm really not in the mood right now."

"No, we can't. You need to talk to me. What the hell is going on with you lately?" she practically hissed. "I get you like to joke around, but it isn't like you to be *this* over the top all of the time. You're driving everybody nuts."

He took a deep breath, but he didn't respond.

"Is this about Fang? The General personally assigned him to Alpha Team, and you know that he's more than qualified to be here. He's been working so hard to become an asset to this group."

"That's not it. I have no issues with his abilities. He actually comes in pretty handy when *you're* not around," he whispered. "You see, the problem lies with *both* of you. You just so happen to be my boss, so he ends up catching all of the flack instead," he said as if he were explaining simple math to a toddler.

"That answer really doesn't explain anything, Frisk."

"But it *does*, Wraith," he muttered. "When Fang joined this team, you promised us full transparency. You explained he's a wolf demon, and that's all fine and dandy. But the part about being a mated wolf demon, whose mate just so happens to be our team leader - that's where shit gets pretty complicated." He huffed. "You explained this to all of us, and from what I understand, the guy, biologically, isn't able to control himself when it comes to you and your safety."

Amari remained silent, taking the information in.

"On normal sub-team missions or regular reconnaissance assignments when you're not around, the guy's a gem. He's the best hand-to-hand combat fighter we have. His tracking skills are top-notch, he has a military background, and he's fully reliable and trustworthy. But on Alpha Team field missions, where the entire group is involved, when *you are* present, the guy's totally on edge. He fights his instincts when it comes to you and becomes easily distracted because of it. Add in the 'demonic bloodlust' part that you've explained to us, and he becomes one giant ticking time bomb."

"Frisk—"

"Hear me out here. If anything happens to you, we both know he's going to lose his shit. And if that happens, we're all going to become his targets if we get in his way. He's fucking dangerous," he spat. "And then, there's the subject of *you*. When the shit hits the fan, how do I know you won't put his safety first, ahead of the safety of the team, and ahead of the very purpose of the mission?" he continued.

"Look at what happened with Quake tonight. This hasn't been the first time we've had problems with him or Mystic making selfish decisions because they're influenced by their relationship with each other. Right now, more than half our team is having private relationships with one another. That means I can't fully trust half of my team's motives, nor can I completely trust the leader giving out the orders."

"Have I ever given you any indication that I'd abandon my team, abandon everything I've worked so hard for, just because I happen to be romantically involved with Fang?" she asked through clenched teeth, attempting to control her temper. "I've been the leader of this

team for over two years, and I've been a member of this team for way longer. I've always done my duty and done everything in my power to keep my teammates safe. And now, just because I'm in a relationship, all that trust falls to the wayside? Don't you dare compare me and Fang to Quake and Mystic."

"He spaced out tonight," Frisk drawled, ignoring her as his eyes shifted over to Renji's seat. "Something happened to you outside. And as soon as Terrain asked if you were okay, he lost focus and took a loaded punch to the head. Did he happen to mention that to you?"

*Renji got hurt?* When she didn't immediately respond, he continued.

"I'm guessing he didn't want to tell you. Could it be because he doesn't want to worry you? Maybe it's because he doesn't want you to think he can't handle being sent out alongside you in the field?"

She sucked her teeth. Frisk, as annoying as he could be, was her second in command for a reason. The guy didn't mess around when it came to the work. He'd proven his ability to lead the team in her stead on multiple occasions over the past two years. She didn't know who he used to be before joining *ROOT*. However, it didn't take much effort to fashion a guess based on the large arching *Semper Fidelis* tattoo that spread the entire width of his back. It was very likely Frisk was once a U.S. Marine. The lives and safety of his teammates meant more to him than his very own.

"What happened to you outside?" he whispered, filling the newfound silence.

"I slit the guard's throat, but it wasn't enough to stop him, and he managed to get me in a chokehold. Terrain let a round off to get him off me. I'm okay, but I just lost my breath for a moment."

"You can very easily tell me that. But, why didn't you tell *Fang* that when he asked you back in the hideout?" He sighed. "The two of you really seem to be struggling with how to work with each other in this group," he continued, more than making his point.

## Chapter 3

Amari took a moment to look Frisk over. The man next to her was tall and built. He had short, dirty blonde hair flared into spikes atop of his head. His eyes were light blue, and he had chiseled features. However, his face didn't look harsh, there was a boyish quality to his expressions, especially when he smiled. His exposed arms were muscled and heavily covered in tattoos.

"You've made your point, and your concerns are wholly valid," she admitted. "However, why are you only telling me about all of this now? Why did I have to approach *you* about it? You never had any issues talking to me about problems before. Why wouldn't you have said something to me earlier before it got to this point?"

He hesitated, appearing to struggle with his answer. "Because this is the first time I've seen you so genuinely happy." He looked down at his hands. "I didn't... I mean, *I don't* want to ruin that for you, Rai. I know we work together, but when we clock out, we've always been really good friends." He looked away. "And I don't have very many friends."

*That's because you intentionally push most people away,* she thought. "Then, as your commander and as your friend, please allow me to work on this. I'll do whatever it takes to reassure you of my commitment to this team and Fang's ability to work within it. But understand, until we all get acclimated to the new situation, it's going to take some time," she sincerely said.

Frisk eyed her before nodding his head.

"Just promise me two things?"

"What's that?"

"Lighten up on him." Her eyes flicked over to Renji's seat. "Your concerns are legitimate, but he's done nothing to betray your trust. You can't punish him for something that hasn't happened."

"Well, that's no fun—"

"*And...*" she continued, interrupting him, "Promise me, you won't ever shut down on me again. If something's on your mind, you have to tell me. Remember, if we stop talking—"

"We die," he finished for her.

This was the line Amari usually recited before each of the team's joint missions.



Nodding, she made a fist with her hand and held it to her heart. It was an action he mirrored while meeting her eyes.

"By the way, we'll need to have a talk with Quake when we get back." She got up from her seat.

"Yup."

"Oh, and whatever you do, don't touch the hostage without your gloves on. She happens to be a psychic, and Mystic believes she's hostile." She walked away.

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Arriving at Renji's row, Amari stole a glance across the aisle.

Their rescued hostage remained in the same position as when first seated. Her long, blonde hair lay matted against her scalp, and her thin frame was hunched over. Her head was tilted, and her eyes blankly stared down at the floor, her hands lying limp at her sides.

Turning away from the spooky woman, she made a point to look Renji over before taking the seat next to him, careful not to step on the wolves sprawled across the floor. Unfortunately, his arm was slung over his eyes, and she wasn't visibly able to make out any bruising from the punch he took earlier in the night.

*We really do need to work on our communication. Her hand gently massaged where the guard grabbed her throat. We shouldn't be keeping secrets from each other for fear of worrying one another.*

He inhaled deeply as she silently sunk in next to him, seeming to slightly relax. Not wanting to disturb him, she began to check the work messages on her phone.

"Everything okay?" he murmured, his arm never leaving his face.

"Yes, actually." Her hand snuck over to hold his, rubbing her thumb across his fingers. "How's your head feeling?"

"A little better now. I'll be back to one hundred percent come the morning," he promised, alluding to his accelerated healing abilities.

"I'm glad." She sighed. "So, where did the enemy hit you?"

He lifted his arm slightly, shifting his eyes over to examine her before speaking. "My right temple. But, I'm okay, really."

"Okay. I trust you. Next time, please just tell me. I'd rather know."

When he nodded, she spoke again.

"The guard I was fighting tonight got me in a chokehold. I'm okay, but I may end up a little bruised tomorrow."

She watched as he stiffened, attempting to suppress a palpable rage. "We need to be able to talk about these things openly so we can learn how to deal with them. No secrets."

Once again, covering his eyes with his arm, he attempted to relax his breathing. "You're right."

"I *am* going to get hurt from time-to-time. It's inevitable. It comes with the territory."

"I understand that. But, it doesn't make it any easier to take, though. Don't you feel the same way about me?" he tenderly asked.

"Of course, I do. It hurts my heart just thinking about it. But, I'm not a mated wolf demon—"

"What exactly is your point?" He obviously wasn't liking the direction their conversation was headed in.

"I'm just saying I need to know you'll be able to control your emotions if something were to happen to me."

"*You* need to know, or *Frisk* does?" he spat, his voice becoming raised.

Amari dropped her head into her hands. This was most likely going to turn into a fight, one she didn't want to have in hushed whispers in front of her team.

"We both do. Don't get angry with me, please. It's a valid team concern." She squeezed his hand again. "Look, when we get back, Frisk and I need to have a conversation with Quake. When we're done, I'd like to openly talk to you about this, not fight."

She could almost feel his anger wash over her. *What a great fucking night this is turning out to be.*

"We already talked about this before I joined the team. What more do you want me to say?" He attempted to keep his voice low. "I'm trying here. I haven't done anything wrong. I don't know what else you guys want me to do."

"Does my presence on missions unnerve you?" She didn't want to have this conversation right now, but she wasn't willing to push it casually aside if Renji was upset. "Do I make you lose focus?"

He removed his arm from his eyes and dropped it to his side.  
"No. Not, really."

She searched his warm, yellow eyes.

"Maybe a little," he admitted as he pulled his gaze away from hers.

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain. It's purely instinctual. I know you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. I've seen you in action. I trust in your leadership and in your abilities, and I trust in this team's ability to keep you safe. It's just a raw protectiveness that comes alive when I believe you could be in danger. I've been trying to work through it, but sometimes it's distracting. The more I try to prevent it, the more sensitive I actually become to it," he admitted, frustrated.

She cupped his face and brought his eyes back to hers. "What can I do to help you?"

His expression softened with the contact. "I don't know of anything you can do. If I'm able to think of something, I'll tell you, baby," he promised. "It's a mated wolf demon thing, and it's not something I have any prior experience with. So, I'm not sure if there's anything anyone can really do. I just have to figure out a way of working through it. I'll get there eventually."

Amari watched as he closed his eyes and nuzzled into her hands, his body instantly relaxing inside of her touch.

*I have this man's absolute devotion.* The understanding warmed her heart. "I am so in love with you," she whispered, accidentally voicing her thoughts before she could stop.

Renji's eyes fluttered open, and he reached out, his thumb brushing across her bottom lip before coming to rest on her chin. A musky, masculine scent made its way into the air, marking her as he looked at her.

"I'll never get tired of hearing that." He leaned forward and took her lips in a chaste kiss.

"Oh, come on!" Frisk's strained voice shouted from the back.

As Amari and Renji turned, peering between the gap between their seats, they saw Trace directly behind them, holding his nose. Further down the line, Quake had also pinched his nose and was breathing through his mouth. All the way in the back, Frisk was muttering to himself while staring at the ceiling.

"Fucking... wolf demons..."

All the women were smiling.

"Sorry!" she yelled, trying to suppress a laugh.

"We talked about this shit, damn it! I'm glad the crop-dusting of pheromones is so enjoyable for everyone here with ovaries, but for the rest of us, it fucking stinks!" he squinted his eyes. "Why the hell would you two kick up a fuss in a damn plane? It's not like I can open a freaking window to get some air in here!" he grunted out, through sporadic coughs.

Amari elbowed Renji. "You should apologize, too," she said while giggling.

"Oh, hell, no! Let him suffer! Serves him right!" he loudly shouted.

"But, what about Quake and Trace? What'd they ever do to you?" she asked once her laughter subsided.

"I'll buy them a round of drinks the next time we all go out."

Smiling, she sunk into her seat and took in her mate's marking scent. Closing her eyes, she hoped to sneak in a few moments of rest. However, her mind, as usual, conjured up a flurry of images of all the things she wanted to do to his body once she finally got him home.

*I think I'll take him in the shower.*

She imagined the teasing way she'd run her tongue over his sharp teeth in a steamy kiss while sweeping her hands over his hard, muscled chest. She pictured how she'd slide her soapy, wet body down his, making him groan low in his throat as he watched her, before taking his diamond-hard—

Protective, blue powers abruptly engulfed her. She snapped out of the fantasy in a panic as an electric shock zipped straight up her spine.

*What the hell?*

Turning to her right, she realized that Renji was watching her. His attention was obviously drawn in by the scent of her arousal.

He tilted his head sideways in question as she looked at him.

Turning her head, she quickly looked to her left, trying to find the source of the threat.

Two dilated, terror-stricken eyes were staring at her.

Amari flinched. *What the fuck?*

At some point, the hostage had shifted. Her previously unfocused eyes were now sharp, and they remained unblinking as they stared in her direction.

She tried to convince herself the woman's movement was some kind of a fluke, but she couldn't help but flinch yet again when the hostage reached out across the aisle as if seeking her touch.

*Get it together!* She tried to swallow back sheer terror. *You're the team leader, damn it!*

Taking a deep breath, she twisted in her seat. Her right hand reached for her Glock while her left hand went straight for the set of gloves in her pocket.

"What the hell is she doing?" Renji shouted as he leaned over her, finally getting a full view of what spooked her.

His words had the entire team launching out of their seats and releasing their weapons as they made their way to the front of the plane.

"Don't touch her!" Mystic commanded as she ran down the aisle, positioning her firearm at the hostage's head.

"I'm not going to!" She aimed her gun at the woman, never once breaking eye contact with her. "Can you understand me?" She was thankful a firm sense of authority was able to make it into her voice.

The woman didn't respond.

Reinforcing her shield and shuffling her left hand into her glove, she reached over the aisle to make contact.

"Wraith!" Mystic warned.

"I've got a glove on, and my shield is up. I just want to see what happens."

When she took the woman's hand into her glowing, blue one, the hostage gently entwined their fingers as the rest of the team looked on.

She didn't feel anything.

"That's enough, Wraith," Renji snarled, flashing his fangs. "We're almost back at the base. Let *ROOT* deal with her."

Her brows furrowed in irritation.

"He will betray you," the woman whispered through clenched teeth, her lips unmoving.

"What?"

"When in the arms of another, he will break your heart. A life must be sacrificed to replace the one taken away."

Pulling her hand free, she watched as the hostage's hand dropped lifelessly back onto her lap. She didn't know why, but her heart was racing in her chest.

Moments passed in complete silence.

"Could you read my palm next? I'm a Sagittarius, my lucky number is fifteen, and I have a giant crush on this girl in my department! What do you see in *my* future?" Frisk sarcastically hollered over to the hostage, obviously attempting to change the spine chilling mood.

The ploy mostly worked with a few chuckles making their way through the group, easing the tension. However, Amari remained unaffected as she sat motionless in her chair, staring at the hostage.

"Wraith!" Renji snapped.

The sheer anger in the alpha's voice broke her out of her trance.

"Huh?" She looked over at him.

Renji's expression was one of rage and menace.

*He will betray you. When in the arms of another, he will break your heart...*

She didn't know why, but she felt absolutely ill at the moment.

"Prepare for landing," came the pilot's voice through the plane's intercom system.

## Chapter 4

Renji glanced out the window of their prop plane, staring at the clustered buildings that now occupied the horizon. Boasting several apartment complexes, a training center, a large office building, and a large medical center, the small base had become home in the most recent months. The grounds were surrounded by twenty-foot concrete walls, topped with electrical shock wire, preventing curiosities from the civilians on the outside. A tall flag pole shot up outside the heavily guarded, and only, entranceway, adorned with the South Korean flag.

For all appearances, the base appeared as an impenetrable governmental fortress, and either due to the strict security measures that were taken to keep it that way or genuine fear from the outside, people left it alone.

He wasn't sure what the government of this country knew about their secret organization. But from what Amari had told him, there were rumors that the 'powers that be' actually thought they were one of their own. If that were true, then the base was a sleeper agent in its own rite. How such a feat could be managed, boggled the mind.

When the plane's door opened, he realized a small party made up of three Medical Research agents, and three Interrogation agents were waiting on the runway.

Amari and Mystic exited the plane first, setting off to debrief the outside group on the state of the hostage and the two captured guards. Trace followed closely behind them, carrying the rescued hostage.

Once his team leader was out of sight, Renji released the breath he didn't realize he was holding. *That woman is going to be the death of me. Of all the stupid...*

"You okay, Fang?" Frisk asked in passing as he walked over to the two guards.

He responded with a scowl. Although he respected the man's abilities, he honestly couldn't stand him. It was evident to him, and everyone else, that Frisk didn't trust him. Usually, when he addressed him, it was purely to antagonize him.

Frisk hurled the guard's body onto his shoulder. "Not talking to me, babe?"

Channeling his patience, he wished this night could be over. "I'm fine. Just peachy."

"Super! Then do you mind taking the other guard outside?" Without waiting for a response, he set off toward the exit.

Frowning, Renji threw the second guard over his shoulder and turned to follow him out to their base's landing strip. As they walked over to the small group taking copious notes around Amari, Frisk once again addressed him.

"I know I've been a dick lately, and I'm sorry."

The words, coupled with the sincerity in his voice, threw Renji off balance, making him wary of his intentions. He made no effort to respond.

Upon approaching Amari and Mystic's small audience, the two men dumped the guards in unison before turning to rejoin the rest of their team on the runway.

"I need you to know that you *can* trust me. I mean that seriously. If something's on your mind or if you need something, I got you. I fuck around a lot, but I don't play games when it comes to my people. If you don't believe me, you can ask any of the other brothers or sisters in this unit. That's all I'm saying."

When Frisk walked off, he followed a few feet behind him.

*What was all that about? What the hell did he and Amari talk about on the flight over here?* he wondered. *Figures the one time I try and nap instead of eavesdrop, some crazy conversation about me goes down.*

Meeting up with the rest of the team, he whistled loudly, prompting the three wolves to exit the plane and join him.

"Terrain, Trace, and Fang, you're dismissed. Keep an eye on your messages in case anything comes up. Your reports on this mission will be due to me before the end of day tomorrow," Frisk commanded as he saluted them.

The three agents returned the salute before Renji broke off and made his way over to the base's parking area with his wolves on his heels. He needed to make a quick stop at the Dobongsan nature preserve.

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"She has psychic abilities and *will* invade your mind and manipulate your thoughts if given a chance. It's imperative that *only* other psychics work with her, those who have absolute mastery of their abilities."

Mystic had Amari's full attention as she instructed the Medical and Interrogation agents about the care the hostage was to receive.

"This woman was brutally tortured. Her psyche is fragmented. She's not sane, and she *will* lash out with her powers. Be warned that you cannot trust what you think, see, or feel when in her presence. No one should be left alone with her." Her voice slightly cracked as she looked down at the floor.

*What the hell did you see in that woman's mind?* She watched her hands slightly tremble.

As the small group made off with the hostage and guards, the two women turned to meet back up with Frisk and Quake on the runway.

"What do you think will happen to her?" Mystic softly asked, breaking the silence of the walk.

"I think our poor hostage is going to remain one for a while longer," she answered, taking pity on the strange abducted woman. "There are obviously a lot of questions that need to be answered about the two guards that were with her. Until *ROOT* figures out what that was all about, and where she's been all this time, they're not going to let her go back to her family."

"She scares the shit out of me, but I can't help but feel so sorry for her. She's been through so much. There's just no way she'll ever be normal again." The silver-haired psychic sniffled as tears slowly began to roll down her cheeks.

Halting in her stride, Amari wrapped her arms around the petite woman. "I'm here for you. Let it out."

Clearing her throat, she returned the hug before frantically wiping tears away. "Sorry, I'm a little off today."

"I completely understand. Don't worry about it."

The two women released each other and again took off down the runway.

"Do you have any idea what she could've been talking about back there when we touched?" Amari wondered offhandedly.

"What exactly happened before that whole commotion, anyway?"

"I think I fell into a light sleep. The next thing I knew, my protective powers kicked up, and when I tried to figure out why, I saw she moved. She was just staring at me."

"Do you remember what you were dreaming about?"

"Ah. It was about Fang," she quickly said, not wanting to get into the specifics.

Mystic paused, deep in thought. "The mind is most vulnerable when a person is asleep. She was most likely poking around in your thoughts if she was focusing on you. Good thing your powers kicked in and woke you up. I really can't say what she was attempting to do."

"Do you think her message might've been about Fang?" she worriedly asked.

"Try not to let it get to you. That woman isn't well. It could've been about anything; something she heard while being tortured, something she imagined, a childhood memory, the list of possibilities goes on and on."

The explanation did little to ease her sense of dread. As if picking up on her feelings, Mystic once again attempted to reassure her.

"In case you haven't noticed, Fang's infatuated with you, sweetie. He truly loves you, and you're both very fortunate to have each other. That man would happily die before he ever betrayed you, and I don't see him jumping into the arms of another in this lifetime either. Seriously, don't worry about it."

"...in this lifetime..." Amari's mind repeated as she approached the two waiting men. *Whose lifetime, I wonder? My very short one... or his incredibly long one?*

"You ready?" Frisk asked as his eyes flicked over to Quake.

"Yup. Let's get this over with."

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It was another two hours before Amari, exhaustedly, walked through the door of her and Renji's shared apartment. Apparently, the alpha,

as usual, cooked something wonderful, and the smell of the meal had her stomach growling.

Kicking off her boots, she disarmed in the hallway before entering the large open kitchen. Once there, she grabbed an uncorked wine bottle from the shiny white countertop and took a giant swig, closing her eyes as the warm liquid washed over her throat.

"Rough day, *baby*?" Renji sarcastically asked as he watched her from the darkness of the dining room.

He was dressed only in pajama pants that slung off of his waist, flaunting his broad shoulders, defined stomach muscles, indented hips, and thick thighs. His cut arms were crossed tightly against his sculptured chest as he leaned against the wall, staring at her with narrowed, golden eyes. His long, onyx hair was free of its usual ponytail, splaying down his lower back.

His beautiful masculine features were tight, making him look more dangerous than handsome.

*Here we go. Because fighting with everyone all night long wasn't enough. Let's just keep the momentum going here, as well.* Turning, she stomped her way over to the bedroom.

His footsteps could be heard trailing closely behind her.

*So much for getting away.*

Entering the room, she braced herself for the drastic change in temperature as she stormed around the king-sized bed that was piled high with fuzzy cream blankets. She halted at Renji's nightstand and pulled her vest up over her head. "You seem to have something you want to say," she calmly said over her shoulder as she worked to unfasten the clasp of her tactical pants.

He momentarily paused as he watched her undress. His expression hardened as if he were trying to suppress his instant physical reaction to the mere sight of her flesh.

"Why did you touch her?" he finally asked as he dragged his eyes away from her semi-naked form.

She rummaged through his top drawer. "I just wanted to see what would happen." She pulled out and put on one of his T-shirts.

"You didn't want anyone touching her, yet you decided to do it. *Why?*" he demanded.

"I didn't want anyone touching her until we knew what she was capable of. Back on the plane, Mystic told us we shouldn't make

skin-to-skin contact with her. In case you didn't notice, I wore a glove, and my shield was up. Nothing happened, so what's the problem, *baby?*" she said with forced sweetness.

Since Renji moved in six months ago, the couple was trying to work through an onslaught of issues related to his out of control mating instincts. The man was always seemingly on edge and quick to anger. Amari devotedly remained patient and understanding, but some days she was utterly exhausted trying to manage his over the top concerns. The only thing keeping her calm was the knowledge that he was dealing with forces far outside of his control, and he was honestly trying to work through them.

Add in the fact she was head over heels in love with him, well, there was that, too.

She heard a low rumble escape his throat.

*He's pissed.* Crossing her arms, she turned around to look at him. *Eyes are still two warm, golden sunsets. That's a plus.* She took a calming breath and walked over to him, placing her palm against his heart. "I'm sorry if I worried you," she sincerely said. "But why can't you just trust me?" Sighing, she dropped her head down in defeat.

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Renji swore he could have ripped his hair out. "I *do* trust you, Amari. None of us trusted that woman, not even you. Yet you..." he took a deep breath. *Why am I so angry?* He looked at his mate's slumping form.

She looked defeated.

His body instinctually sought to comfort her, and his arms wrapped around her waist, holding her tightly as he took in her scent.

"I'm... sorry. I really don't have any right to be mad. I'm happy you're alright, and we get to spend a little quiet time together." He kissed the top of her head.

He felt her lean into his hold.

*I really have to get over this overprotectiveness crap. This isn't me! Never in my life have I behaved like... this. If I don't stop the domineering alpha bullshit, I'm going to end up losing her.*

The thought terrified him, and his arms possessively tightened around her, never wanting to let her go.

Amari was the only woman he ever truly wanted in his long life. She completed him, and he loved her with every fiber of his being. Upon realizing he managed to mark her as his mate so many months ago, he was elated, fully expecting his long overdue happily ever after. However, the euphoria and balance that were supposed to accompany a mated pairing within his species were sorely absent. And, his natural protective and aggressive instincts only seemed to go haywire instead.

His days were spent battling against the urge to please her and keep her safe, and the impulse to rip any male that came near her to shreds. The only time he ever managed to find slight relief was when they were alone together or when he was inside of her.

She was terrific at putting up with him, but he knew they couldn't go on this way. Amari was human, and therefore, she wasn't bound to their pairing like he was. He feared it was only a matter of time until he either pushed her too far or she realized she'd be much better off with someone else.

"Renji! Can't breathe!"

He eased his hold. "Sorry."

Her giggle eased his nerves.

"It's been a very long night for both of us." Taking him by the hand, she led him back into the kitchen. "Let's eat."

\*\*\*

The couple took their time eating and enjoying each other's company over candlelight. Their long white-washed wood dining table could comfortably seat twelve, but as usual, only the two seats nearest to the kitchen's entranceway were ever used.

The duo practically inhaled the Teriyaki Salmon Renji had meticulously made. Shared, comfortable conversation was a hum between them, only interrupted by the occasional sip of wine.

"So, Frisk apparently wants to be my best friend now," Renji said through a hearty laugh.

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

"He basically apologized for being a jerk and told me I could talk to him if I ever needed anything."

Amari smiled. *Really? Wow, Frisk. You actually took our conversation to heart!* "That's great! I'm glad."

The tips of his fangs peeked out as he smiled. "I have this sneaking suspicion you might've had something to do with that."

"Not really. I just asked him to give you a fair chance. That's all."

He abruptly took her hand, gently pulling her onto his lap.

She smiled, straddling his hips and placing her hands on his shoulders. Reaching up, she removed her bun, and her loose hair fell over them in a black curtain as she looked down at his face.

"I don't deserve you," he whispered, his eyes searching hers. "I'm so sorry I've been such a pain in the ass lately. Thank you so much for putting up with me. I don't know what comes over me sometimes," he stammered. "Yet, I know I'm being ridiculous while it's happening. If that makes any sense."

Her mouth came down, softly brushing his lips. "We'll get through it," she sweetly promised against his mouth. "I'm never giving up on you, Renji. You're stuck with me now, remember?" Her voice became a low whisper. "I know you can't help what's happening to you, and I know how hard you're trying."

The wolf demon exhaled in relief as if the words were a desperately sought after reassurance. He threw his head back and took a deep pull of the air as his lips slightly parted in heated anticipation.

*He can smell my desire.*

While innocently ghosting her mouth over his, Amari lightly traced the raised skin behind his ear, which was the site of his UNI-chip. When connected to the brain, it would allow the host to understand, write, and speak all existing human languages. Upon signage, all agents were fitted with one.

She kissed the site before nibbling on his earlobe. Her hands then slid down his broad shoulders and chest. Slightly readjusting her position on his lap, she moved her core against his newfound erection, slowing rocking above him.

As her tongue slid into his mouth and ran across his teeth, Renji's hands tightly wrapped around her waist. Placing additional pressure onto her hips, he increased the weight behind her thrusts.

When their breathing became ragged, she tangled her fingers in the long length of his hair, gently pulling his head back to give her further access into his mouth.

She felt him momentarily drop his hands to push his pants down from his hips. The thick, substantial length of his arousal sprang up to rest against her.

He was hot and solid and wet.

*So ready for me. Always ready for me,* her mind purred as his claws worked to slice the sides of her panties away.

His marking scent was washing over her, intensely enhancing her desire. Releasing her hold on his hair, she made quick work of removing her shirt and bra.

Renji groaned as his hands smoothed over her body, worshipping her flesh. "You are so beautiful," he reverently whispered. His voice became a low, growling echo as he looked over her with his now glowing, red eyes.

Dropping her head to his neck, she bit into the muscle, working her way over to his shoulder. She lifted slightly, removing the remnants of her panties before delicately setting her wet folds over his throbbing shaft.

"Tell me you love me," she said near his ear. Her voice became low and husky, almost pleading.

His hands flew to her face, dragging her mouth back over his, and he kissed her with such intensity she thought they'd both drown in the overwhelming sensation of it. As they paused for air, her forehead rested on his, and his eyes intensely bored into hers.

"I love you," he swore through hitched, husky breaths. "I love you with all I am and everything I have, Amari. And I always will," he promised. "I am forever yours."

Holding his eyes, she lifted her hips, watching his face as she slowly slid his massive member deep inside her.

## Chapter 5

Renji's eyes squeezed shut as he fully surrendered to the paralyzing wave of ecstasy washing over him.

He could feel Amari's inner muscles stretching to accommodate his girth as they clenched down on him, pulsating around him. Before he could fully recover, she set a hard, measured pace, slowly withdrawing, before quickly slamming back down on him.

The room soon became filled with the wet sounds of his cock leaving her when she raised her hips, along with the harsh smacking sounds of her heavy downward thrusts.

Moving his hands back over her hips, he added his strength to her thrusts, filling her completely.

Groaning in approval, Amari threw her head back and swept her hands over her breasts, kneading the soft mounds and pinching her tightened nipples as he looked on, thoroughly mesmerized.

"Come for me, baby," she demanded, as her hand dropped to the sweet juncture between her thighs.

Springing from the chair, he turned and roughly pinned her against the dining room wall with his hips while he supported her thighs with his arms.

"*You* first," he growled through elongated, fanged teeth. Not giving her a chance to argue, his mouth dropped to her neck, and he worked to suck and bite at the soft flesh while furiously slamming into her.

When she desperately grabbed onto his shoulders, he could feel her body tensing as her orgasm threatened to overtake her.

"I'm there, baby. Come with me," she begged as her release wildly erupted from within her.

Renji was barely able to hold back his release before he stood up, but the feeling of his mate's orgasm fisting his member shattered the last shred of his self-control.

His clawed hands grabbed her wrists, lifted them high above her head, and used them to pin her against the wall. When her legs wrapped around his waist, he madly thrust into her.

His body crumpled against hers as he exploded inside her over and over and over again. The sheer pleasure of his orgasms shot like hot electricity through his body.



Sex with Amari was like a drug, and the high was like nothing in this world.

"You are amazing," she moaned into his ear as she nibbled on his earlobe.

Struggling to catch his breath, he slowly made his way back down to earth, focusing on the sound of her rapid heartbeat against his chest.

"Do you ever have multiples?" he wondered. He couldn't remember the last time he only came once anymore, which, over the long course of his life, used to be pretty normal.

"Not like you do," she softly said against his neck. "I can have one and then another soon after. But, nothing like what you're able to do. I guess my plumbing is a little different."

A devilish smile crept over his face. *Challenge accepted.*

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Amari awoke before the alarm, not knowing what time she'd managed to fall asleep the night before. Renji was sleeping on top of her. His head rested on her chest, and there was a trace of a small, satisfied smile still ghosting over his lips.

*That was certainly an interesting night.* She ran a hand through his long, black hair.

Apparently, she was, in fact, capable of having multiple orgasms.

*How many had there been? Was it three?* She found she'd lost count. *I'll have to ask him when he wakes up,* she thought, barely suppressing a giggle.

Gently rolling him to his side, she slipped away, tiptoeing into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee.

*Christ, I'm going to be sore today. With all the sexual activity over the past six months, you'd think my body would be used to it by now.*

She stretched tight muscles as the pot began to bubble. It wasn't long before she heard the bathroom's showerheads turn on.

*Wow. Someone's up pretty early today. Maybe he's ready for another round?* She devilishly smiled as she poured herself a cup of the potent brew. She managed to take one sip before deciding to

sneak over to the bathroom to join him. When approaching the door, a low groaning sound stopped her dead in her tracks.

Her eyes widened. *Um. Okay. I'm an adult, and so is he. This is normal. Maybe he just needs a little alone time?*

Discouraged, she headed back to the kitchen. She might have taken a total of two steps when she heard another groan, but this voice sure didn't belong to Renji.

Spinning around, she pressed her ear against the door.

A woman was panting, calling his name over the sounds of paced thrusting.

Her heart pounded against her chest as she held her breath, straining to hear.

"Tell me you love me, baby," the woman begged.

"I love you, Ellie," Renji promised her. "I belong to you. Always will."

Amari panicked, and time seemed to slow down as she backed away from the door and kicked the damn thing right off the hinges. Her body moved of its own accord, wildly running into the bathroom. She almost collapsed upon seeing Renji pinning a woman up against the wall of their shower by her wrists. Her legs were wrapped around his hips, and he was fucking her.

Hard.

"Renji!" Her mind raced, attempting to make sense of it all. *This can't be real. What's he... Why? Who is she?*

His expression was set in a hateful scowl as he turned to look at her. "Get out!" he demanded. "Now!"

"*You* get the fuck out! This is *my* house, asshole! What the hell do you think you're doing?" she screamed. Her voice was so full of fury that she could barely recognize it as her own.

It was at this moment that the woman he was screwing cocked her head to the side, finally giving her the chance to see her face.

Her long, blonde hair was soaked by the water and hung tightly over her naked breasts. Her eyes were wide and dilated, staring right through to her very soul.

She nearly vomited at the recognition.

"*You?* How? What the *fuck* is going on?" Her arms protectively wrapped around her waist as she backed away. She suddenly felt freezing cold.

"It was never going to work out," Renji offered with a hint of amusement. "Not for very long, anyway." He looked her over in disgust.

"Huh?" she sputtered stupidly. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You can easily answer your damn question by just taking a look at yourself," he growled. "Look at me and look at yourself. Then see if you can still ask me what the hell I'm talking about."

Shakily she turned to her left, looking into her large vanity mirror. The reflection that stared back scared the living shit out of her.

The elderly woman in the mirror had long, white hair and unique, blue eyes. She was wrinkled and hunched over with age spots marking her arms. Amari instantly knew who the woman was, but her brain refused to accept the revelation.

She backed away from the mirror, horrified.

"I don't understand. What is happening?" She felt as though she were about to fully lose it.

"Don't tell me that you still don't get it!" He laughed. "What am I supposed to do? Come home and stick my dick into *that*?" he incredulously said as he pointed to the mirror.

"What?" She glanced back at the reflection.

"Look at me, Wraith!"

She snapped her head back in his direction. The blonde hostage he was holding wrapped her arms around his neck and peered at her from over his shoulder.

"I barely age. But, you sure as hell do." He grinned. "Look at me and then look at yourself," he repeated as her eyes once again fluttered back to the mirror.

The image of her elderly self was staring right back at her with saddened, blue eyes.

She shook her head. "This isn't real," she whispered as she attempted to make sense of her situation. "There's no way this could be real."

"But it is, *my love*. This problem is very, very real, isn't it?" he said before erupting into an obnoxious fit of laughter.

Sheer rage erupted through her body, and her hands balled up as she trembled. Furious, and out of control, she pounced, tackling the pair and punching Renji's jaw with everything she had.

"Renji!"

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"Amari, you have to wake up!" Renji shouted as he shook her, trying his best to rouse her.

His instincts momentarily kicked up in warning, and he somehow managed to shift his body to the side one second before her fist connected with his teeth.

"You're having a nightmare!" His voice became frantic as he wrapped his arms around her, tightly holding her to him.

When she finally opened her eyes, she studied him for only a moment before her face twisted in disgust. "Don't you dare fucking touch me!" She forcibly pushed him off of her. "You, *asshole!*"

"Amari, you have to listen to me. We're in our bedroom. You were having a bad dream and called out to me. I'm just trying to help!"

She looked around the room before her eyes landed back on him. Then, without any warning, she suddenly bolted down the hallway, storming into their shared bathroom.

He watched as the lights flickered on, and he counted down the minutes in silence, not sure if he should follow. It was only when he heard the sounds of soft, stifled sobbing that the decision was made for him.

But when he burst into the bathroom, he froze.

Amari, the fiercest and most fearless woman he'd ever known, was staring into their mirror while large, heated tears streamed down her beautiful face. The sight of her turned his blood glacial and made his heart slam in his chest.

It was panic that got him moving again, and he stumbled over to her. Holding out his arms, he tried to pull her into them. But, she hurriedly backed away, slamming against the bathroom wall in the process.

"Stay the hell away from me!"

Worried, and not knowing what else to do, he plopped down on the tiled floor, crossing his legs and arms while trying his best to appear small and unthreatening in some way. "You had a nightmare. Do you remember what you dreamed about?"

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*That was a dream, or this is?* Amari wondered as she glanced back into the bathroom mirror.

A young, toned woman with porcelain skin, blue eyes, and black hair stared back at her.

"What's the last thing I did before falling asleep?" Her voice came out angry and on edge.

"Me," Renji innocently answered. "We were trying to see how many times I could make you—"

When she scowled, he quickly gave up on the attempt to finish the sentence.

"Three times?" Remembering her thoughts from her dream, she turned and stared at the white marble walk-in shower.

"Yes. Three," he hesitantly answered. "Baby, you're really starting to scare me."

Ignoring him, she walked over and touched the shower's wall, gliding her palm over the dry surface.

"Look at me, Amari!"

*"Look at me, Wraith..."* she remembered. *"Look at me and look at yourself..."* She turned and looked at him. *"I barely age, Wraith. But, you sure as hell do."* New tears streamed down her cheeks before she could stop them. "You don't age, but I do."

"Huh? What the hell are you talking about?" Getting up, Renji once again tried to hug her.

This time she didn't back away. She hurriedly wrapped her arms around him and began to sob.

"What was your dream about?" He ran his hands through her hair while lightly rocking her. "Please, baby, I need you to talk to me."

"You... and the hostage... I was so old," she sputtered.

"Me and the hostage, what?"

"You were fucking her!" Releasing her hold on him, she backed away, feeling absolutely sick.

He just stared at her. "It was a dream. It wasn't real."

"It sure felt pretty fucking real to me!" she spat, trying to subdue a gag.

"I'd never..." He shook his head. "Amari, the only person I want in this world is you. It's always been you."

*It wasn't real. He didn't do anything wrong!* She struggled to get her wits about her. "I was old. You told me... You don't age, but I do. You may want me now, but how can we possibly have a future together?" She wrapped her arms around herself in complete grief. "Time is very different for each of us. It might have always *been* me, but it can't possibly always *be* me, now can it?" she whispered as the tears continued to run down her face.

Renji took a sharp intake of air. He looked at her like she scarred him, leaving him off balance and vulnerable. "All we can do is enjoy the time we do have. Don't count the days and don't track the time. I sure as hell don't. Just live for the day... and don't think about... stuff like that," he mumbled as he stared down at the floor.

She didn't know what to say.

"How long has this been bothering you?"

"It crosses my mind from time-to-time. I never really paid it much attention. But the dream..." She didn't know how to continue.

"The dream made it real for you?"

"Yes, it did."

"Christ, Amari, why is it so hard for you to just talk to me sometimes? Why haven't you ever mentioned this before?" He sucked his teeth.

She hesitated, unsure of how to answer. *Because not everyone can be as confident in their vulnerability as you can, Renji. Not everyone can be so at ease with their feelings. I have to be strong, or else all my fears surrounding us might actually break me.* She shook her head in frustration. "I don't know where the hell this crap came from all of a sudden," she supplied instead, becoming angry with her shortcomings. "It was just a dream."

*"The mind is most vulnerable when a person is asleep."*

She blinked a few times as Mystic's earlier words echoed through her head.

"I fucked up." She nervously ran her hand through her hair. "I seriously and majorly fucked up."

Her mate's head tilted to one side in obvious confusion. "What?"

"You were right. I shouldn't have touched that woman on the plane. She got the fuck into my head!" she spat as anger rose through her body, replacing all the fear.

"Huh?"

She walked back to the bedroom and grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand. "*She's* doing this to me. She's poking around in my mind."

He seemed to turn her words over in his mind before an aura of rage began emanating from his skin. "I'll kill the bitch," he growled before he joined her in the bedroom. "Who the hell are you calling?"

"I need to talk to Mystic."

## Chapter 6

It was one o'clock in the morning when Mystic received Wraith's frantic call. The woman was absolutely furious, speaking in scattered speech about the hostage they just rescued, saying she invaded her mind. Apparently, she had a nightmare and was beside herself.

Not knowing what else to do, she quickly dressed and made her way up to Wraith's apartment on the eighth floor. When her leader greeted her, she expected she'd be angry. But, nothing prepared her for the set of swollen and puffy eyes that looked over her instead.

*She's been crying.* She firmly took her hand with her own. "Try to calm down."

For some reason, the very thought of Wraith becoming emotional was absurd. She'd known her since she first joined the team years ago and they became fast friends. She happily watched as she quickly rose through the ranks. Wraith was the first choice in replacing their previous Alpha Team leader, Inspect, when she was promoted to Reconnaissance Department head, over two years ago. Mystic admired the woman, fiercely. The very thought of her ever being sad and vulnerable never once crossed her mind, even as a joke.

It was unnerving.

As her friend pulled her down the apartment's darkened hallway, she said, "I need you to tell me about what you saw. Tell me everything and try not to leave any detail out. Not one."

Wraith brought her to a dimly lit, frigid bedroom where multiple pillows and blankets were strewn about the beige, carpeted floor. Taking a seat on the edge of the bed in the center of the room, she pulled Mystic down with her. Her eyes then hesitantly flew to the corner of the room, where Fang was silently watching them.

*Would you rather show me?* she mentally asked, sensing hesitation.

*I don't want to hide anything from him. But, some parts are going to be hard to describe in front of him,* Wraith sadly said.

*I can connect him, too, and you can show us. Would that be easier?*

She nodded.



"Fang, Wraith is going to show us what she saw. Is it alright if I mentally connect you?" she asked as she took note of his worried expression.

"Yeah." He hurriedly made his way over to sit next to them. The moment he was at his woman's side, he wrapped his arm tightly around her shoulders, physically supporting her.

*He really is so perfect for you.* Keeping the private thought to herself, she closed her eyes and connected with their consciousness.

*Try to remember, Rai. Picture every detail in your mind. If something gets to be too hard, then stop. Don't force it,* she instructed, as she and Fang were transported into Wraith's kitchen, where she walked down the hallway to start a pot of coffee.

All parties watched on as the dream played out for them from start to finish without interruption. When the mental world turned black, signaling the end of the memory, she cut the connection and opened her eyes. She immediately noticed a black, menacing aura visibly emanating from Fang. His free hand was balled up into a fist, and it was trembling. His canine teeth were elongated, and his eyes were red and glowing.

"Holy shit!" She bolted to her feet, trying to put some distance between them.

Wraith gave her a confused look before realization apparently dawned on her. Her hands then flew up to his face, cupping it and drawing it to her.

"Stay with me." She gently placed a kiss on his cheek. "Stay right here with me, baby."

He physically relaxed and squeezed his eyes shut. A few moments later, when he opened them again, they were back to their original golden color.

"It's okay. He's fine. He's just angry. He *won't* hurt you."

"I'm fine," he repeated. His voice was a dark, murderous echo.

*Guess that's the demonic bloodlust she warned us about.* She shivered, unsure if it was due to the room's cold temperature or because of what she just saw.

"Sorry, the thermostat in this room isn't working. I keep meaning to get it fixed." Wraith pulled a forgotten blanket from the floor and held it out to her.

Clearing her throat, she accepted the item, wrapped it around her shoulders, and returned to the bedside. "When you fell asleep on the plane, you said you were dreaming of Fang. What were you dreaming about?" she asked, recapturing her hand.

"I was dreaming about having sex with him in the shower. I didn't even get to before I was interrupted."

"Okay, that could explain why the dream took place in the shower if it's what she got a peek at back then," she absentmindedly said. "The aging thing... When's the last time you thought about that, ah, problem?"

"Today, when we were talking on the runway," she remembered. "You mentioned... this lifetime. And it made me think about the differences in our time," she mumbled as Fang's arm tightened around her.

"When you two speak to each other in private, do you use your codenames or your real names?"

"We use our real names," Fang answered.

"Always?"

"Yes, always. We knew each other once... before joining *ROOT*. The use of our real names is what's natural to us. The only time we use codenames is when other people are around," he admitted. "Why?"

"In the dream, you only referred to her as Wraith. If the dream weren't being manipulated, her subconscious would've only had you speak to her using her real name if it's what she's used to hearing," she softly said. "The hostage doesn't know your real name, Wraith, but you did unwillingly give her Fang's. Not that it matters much, but it does go to show she was pulling some strings in the background."

Wraith looked down at her hands, worrying at her nails as she tried to process all this information.

"Oh, honey," Mystic gently said. "She showed you your fears. She made them as real to you as I am, physically sitting right next to you now. You're terrified of losing this man. You believe he'll leave you, and you really, truly, shouldn't be." Her eyes briefly fluttered over to Fang.

"I've known you for a very long time, Rai. I've seen you handle every obstacle thrown in your way. All except for one, and that is

loss. You compartmentalize it and pack it away, never dealing with the reality of it. I'm not sure what happened in your past, but I honestly don't have to be a psychic to know you've lost someone very important to you, and it traumatized you deeply—"

"I've lost quite a few people," she snapped. "And, I lost them all suddenly and without warning. And, they all happily moved on with their lives, completely forgetting about me..." Her eyes accusingly glanced over at Fang. "And I moved on just the same as if they never even existed in the first place. But then I found one again. I found *him*, and I will *not* lose him this time—"

"Rai, you can't stop time, and you can't stop death. You don't have to deal with it today, but you *are* going to have to deal with the fact that you and Fang *might not* last forever. You *will* grow old, and one day, you *are* going to die, and so will the people around you—"

"Can we stop?" Fang's hands were massaging his temples. "I... I can't listen to this."

She was so focused on her friend that she didn't notice the toll the conversation was having on him.

*Christ, he can't deal with the thought of losing her, and she can't deal with the thought of losing him. His fear causes him to explode while her fear causes her to implode.*

"How do I stop this chick from coming back?" Wraith asked, trying to change the subject.

"I'm going to put some safeguards into your consciousness. I can keep her out, but I can't stop the nightmares," she admitted. "She opened a door and forced you to feel one of your greatest fears. It's no longer tucked away in a neat and tidy box anymore. You're going to have to deal with it. And until you do, it's going to continue to reappear in your subconscious, just like any other trauma the mind encounters."

"Great. I feel like I'm back in my old psychology class." It was a blatant attempt at a joke, but no smile reached her lips.

Mystic placed her small palm against her forehead. "I just need you to relax. You won't feel anything. This isn't going to hurt. I'll be done before you know it!" She smiled at her before turning to Fang. "Fang, don't go anywhere. You're next. You also fell asleep around that woman, and you carried her, too."

"It wouldn't hurt to do the entire team tomorrow, would it?" she asked, obviously concerned for the remaining members of her team.

"Of course not, I'll make the arrangements myself," she promised as she leaned into her touch and closed her eyes.

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Amari stared over her boss' shoulder while the woman leafed through a thick report from across the desk. The room she was in was spacious. Outside of the executive style desk in the far corner of the room and a small conference table on the other, the space was non-descript. The only personal effects inside were the plaques circling them, praising things like, 'Exceptional Achievement' and 'Agent of the Year' times twenty.

If it weren't for the sunlight streaming in from the many windows, the office would have felt suffocating despite its size.

"This may not be the first time we've encountered these types of soldiers." Inspect threw the stack of papers down on her desk. "Two other teams have accidentally run into similar guards but weren't able to take them down. In both instances, those guards were also associated with a hostage *ROOT* was trying to retrieve. Both teams that fought with them barely escaped with their lives, and both allowed the hostages to slip away." She beamed with pride. "Good job on bringing us both."

"Who is she? The British hostage we recovered. What's her name?" she curiously asked as she looked Inspect over.

The Reconnaissance Department head was a tall woman with long, brown hair and fierce hazel eyes. She'd been the previous leader of Alpha Team before she was promoted into the role of department head two years ago, and Amari once served as her second in command. Inspect also made a point to take her under her wing when she first joined the base. The woman was scarier than any man she ever met.

And she admired her *fiercely*.

"Ellie Swift," she answered. "I heard whispers that the Interrogation Department is having some trouble getting information out of her. Until she cooperates, I'm afraid we won't be able to take her home."

As the women were talking, the phone rang.

Cursing in Yiddish under her breath, Inspect picked it up.

"Yes?" she paused, listening. "My day is always packed. I'm in a meeting right now." She sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll meet you on your floor. I'm bringing the Alpha Team leader with me. She'll be able to answer any questions you have better than I can."

Slamming down the phone, she got out of her chair. "Come on, we're going to meet with some of the Medical Research folks. They have information," she ordered as she took off.

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"Cybertronics?" Amari repeated.

"Explain," Inspect commanded.

Anatomy, the new head of the Medical Research Department, began to look annoyed. Inspect was obviously trying to intimidate him.

"The guards have computer chips in their bodies, controlling their muscular and nervous systems. The use of these electronic circuits in conjunction with living organisms is called cybertronics."

"So, they're being controlled remotely?" Inspect asked.

"Yes. I'm not sure from where, but their bodies are acting without their consent. That's why they won't stop moving and why they're so hard to take down," he finished. "We have a team assisting us from the Technology Department. They'll be looking into the hardware that we're pulling out of these guys."

Looking over, Amari saw two nerdy looking men exit the Medical Research Department's autopsy suite door. They were pale and looked as though they were about to pass out.

As Anatomy followed her eyes, a hint of a smile ghosted over his lips.

*Poor techies*, she thought, taking pity on the men. *They're so out of their element in there*. "So how do we disable these cybertronic soldiers if we reencounter them?"

"Blow them up, cut off limbs, or electrocute them. The loss of main body parts will prevent them from successfully attacking you. Don't get me wrong, it won't stop them from moving, but it does offer you the greatest advantage."

"My team used their stun guns on one. It didn't do much."

"Forget the stun guns. You need to pack some pretty high voltage instead and ensure that you're able to zap them for a pretty decent length of time to fry their circuits."

"What is the medical status of the hostage?" Inspect interrupted.

"She isn't very healthy, but that was to be expected. It didn't appear she's had any proper diet or nutrition in a very long time. There's no way for me to tell how long, though. She's currently holed up with the Interrogation Department."

Inspect sighed. "Looks like I'll be following up with the Tech Department on their findings regarding those circuits." She turned her attention over to one of the traumatized young men using the wall behind him for support. "Hey, you! Instead of standing there trembling, why don't you grow a pair and hurry your ass back to your department? We need to figure out what the hell is going on with that hardware," she commanded. "Lives fucking depend on it!"

The young agent's eyes popped, and he ran, practically stumbling, over to the elevator bank.

"I'm going to head over to the Interrogation's Department's floor," she advised. "Are you done for the day, Wraith?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please update me on your findings with Interrogation. That hostage mentally attacked Mystic and me. With your consent, I'd like to be looped in on her status."

She winked and blew her a kiss. "Sure thing, babe."

*She's like a female version of Frisk.* Amari thought, wondering why she never bothered to notice it before. "I'll walk with you back to the elevators."

Inspect took off, but when she tried to follow, Anatomy called out to her.

"Excuse me, agent Wraith. If you have any more questions or would like to discuss any of my group's findings further, please don't hesitate to contact me directly." He warmly smiled. "My department owes you. We're fully at your service."

"Ah. Thanks." She accepted his card before jogging to catch back up with her boss.

"Don't you ever get tired of men throwing themselves at you?" Inspect whispered as she fell in line alongside her. "That guy's more your usual type."

She shook her head. "You're right. He was. But, I've recently found that particular type doesn't really do much for me."

"Glad you're open to diversity."

"So, you've gotten to know Fang a little over these past six months," she said as they approached the main lobby. "What do you think?"

The department head affectionately punched her in the arm. "He's smokin' hot. Total bad boy type; sexy, rebellious, dangerous, deadly. He oddly suits you very well."

"That's for sure." She rubbed her arm. "So, when are *you* finally going to settle down with a man tough enough to handle you?"

"Oh, please. Such a man doesn't exist."

Amari didn't miss the sparkle in her eyes. "Of course, he does. He's out there. I'm sure of it."

She really missed her casual talks with this woman.

Her boss jumped into the elevator. "Squee! We'd be able to go on a double date, and get our hair and nails done, and talk about all the naughty sex advice we've read in girlie magazines!" she sarcastically said while cracking her knuckles.

Amari shook her head. *She always had a few screws loose.* As the elevator doors opened, she said, "You know ma'am, all jokes aside, it'd be nice to spend some time together again. I've missed you."

The woman studied her for a long moment before nodding in agreement. "It has been a long time, Rai."

"Maybe we could get together and spar or something. You know, just like old times."

At this, Inspect beamed. "You're on, babe. I'll have my secretary book some time on our calendars," she promised, as she exited the elevator and the doors closed behind her.

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As Amari walked back to her office, she let her mind wander through her findings from the day.

*I wonder what new terrorist group or corrupt government is responsible for these Ultimate Soldiers. I swear, there can never be*

*a moment of freaking peace in this world without some psycho threatening to tear everything apart.*

Sighing, she pondered the possible number of Ultimate Soldiers out there and what someone planned on using them for, while she straightened up her desk.

Thankfully the ping of her phone brought her back to reality.

*"Team drinks at Gunbae tonight?"*

Gunbae was the base's bar, and it was usually packed. It offered strong drinks and a large dance floor and was the only option for those too lazy, or just plain uninterested, in leaving the base and mingling with civilians.

The group text exploded, with answers of the affirmative while Amari sent a private message to Renji.

*"You interested in drinks tonight with the gang?"*

He quickly responded.

*"Only if you're up for it. But, if you just want to rest tonight, I'd totally understand."*

*"I'll go. Might as well hang out for a bit, and if we get bored, we can always leave."*

*"Okay. Meet there?"*

*"Yup. See you in a few."*

Switching back to the group message, she advised the team that she and Fang would, in fact, be there, before turning to leave.

*Wait a minute*, she devilishly thought, stopping in her tracks.

Smirking, she took her phone back out of her pocket and sent off a quick message.



## Chapter 7

Loud music assaulted Amari the moment she entered Gunbae. Making her way toward the large, wrap-around bar, she looked for her team in their usual, unofficial spot, in the back.

"So glad you could make it," Frisk said upon her approach. He was leaning over the bar and pulled a seat out next to him. "Where's your other half?"

"Most likely on his way back from dropping off the wolves." She climbed into the offered seat and motioned for the bartender's attention.

"Hey, you two!" Terrain was happily bouncing over to them with Trace in tow.

"You ever wonder if those two are together?" Frisk whispered as they watched them. "Where you find one, you always find the other."

At this, she couldn't help but laugh.

"What? Is that such an odd question to ask?"

"Frisk!" she said, attempting to catch her breath. "How long have you been on this team?"

He became puzzled. "Seven years?"

"Do you ever pay attention to anything that doesn't have to do with work?"

"Not really. Are you going to tell me what's so funny?"

"They are brother and sister," she squeaked out, between her whooping laughter. "They're fraternal twins. Everybody knows that. We've all discussed this numerous times over the years. Where does your mind wander off to sometimes?"

"I really had no idea. This changes everything I've ever thought about them!"

She shook her head, realizing the bartender placed her favorite drink in front of her. "Speaking of those who are together, who've you been into lately?" she asked, knowing he would pick up on the double entendre.

His eyes narrowed. But, before he could answer, Mystic and Quake joined them, and the collective group started talking shop, exchanging funny stories and crazy experiences.

Becoming so enthralled by the conversation, Amari didn't even notice that Anatomy approached her until he gently rubbed her arm.

He flashed her a perfect smile. "Nice to see you again, agent Wraith."

Before she could acknowledge him properly, Frisk's stern voice called out in warning over her shoulder.

"Back off, buddy. She has a psycho boyfriend, and if he sees you, it's highly likely he's going to start trouble. We like it here and don't want to get banned anytime soon." He gave him the once over.

Clearing her throat, she said, "Frisk, I'd like you to meet Anatomy. He's the new *head* of the Medical Research Department. He's working on the two guards we took in yesterday."

Quake tried to suppress a smile. "Good job on insulting the top brass."

Frisk respectfully saluted and returned his attention to the conversation he'd previously been having with the group.

"It would be rude not to come over and say hello," Anatomy softly said, before returning to the other side of the bar.

"He ran away. He really *did* come over here to try to hit on you!" Mystic squeezed her arm.

Shrugging, she took a sip of her drink. "Probably."

"He's gorgeous, Wraith!" Terrain giddily said. "And he's a department head! Shit, if he's lonely, I'll go over there and keep him company."

"Good looks and power. Every girl's dream," Frisk muttered.

"Oh, stop, I can get by on good looks alone, and that's one sexy son of a bitch! The power is just a bonus," Terrain retorted.

"Who's a sexy son of a bitch?" Renji drawled out. He wrapped his arm around Amari's waist as his other flew up to signal the bartender. When he noticed the group suddenly became quiet, he asked, "Did I miss something?"

"Nope, nothing at all. Terrain was just telling us she wanted to bang the new head of the Medical Research Department," Mystic supplied.

"Um. Congratulations?" he offered, obviously not knowing what to say.

"Thanks! Wraith was just going to introduce me." Terrain turned her attention over to her. "Weren't you?"

"You don't need me to be your wingman. Go and introduce yourself. You've never had a problem doing that before." She sighed. *Plus, the minute I step away, a flood of women are going to come over here and try their best to flirt with Renji. Just like they always do the second they think I'm not looking.*

"I've never had a problem doing that before when I was tipsy. I just got here, and I'm completely sober. I don't want to chance the guy leaving before I'm able to drink up some nerve. Come on, you know him. It'll take two seconds."

Renji nudged her. "Go, help her out."

Before she could respond, she was grabbed by the hand and dragged to the other side of the bar.

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Frisk shook his head. *This could turn into trouble.* He took a swig of his beer and almost choked on it when he heard the sound of a very familiar voice behind him.

"Hello, agents. How are my busy little bees?"

*What the hell is Inspect doing here?* he thought, his mind racing as he spun around to face her. "Why are *you* here?" he bluntly asked. "Are you searching for your desk, perhaps? I can't remember very many times I've seen you without it."

"I *am* actually. But, since I just so happen to be higher up on the food chain, I'm going to assign that task over to you. Be a good little boy and find it for me. And while you're looking, grab me a beer, too." She dismissively waved her hand.

It was at this time several women positioned around the bar began to make their way over to Alpha Team's little area, obviously seizing the opportunity to interact with Fang now that Wraith was out of sight.

Frisk watched as Fang rolled his eyes and instead focused his full attention on their department head.

"It's nice to see you again, big boss," he said in greeting.

"It's always nice to see you, Fang. But, where's that pretty girlfriend of yours?"

"She went to introduce Terrain to someone. She should be right back." He glanced over to the other side of the bar.

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"Those circuits have a strange emblem on them," Anatomy rambled. "When I tried to look it up, I found that the image is a logo tied to a global company called Tsuki Industries. The circuit boards themselves are being mass-produced on a large scale; they weren't designed specifically for this purpose."

"So someone's manipulating the hardware to control soldiers remotely," Amari thought out loud. "It would be safe to assume they have access to someone in the medical field since they're able to surgically embed those circuits into the soldier's bodies."

"You're most likely correct on both counts." He checked his watch. "There's a lot of information on Tsuki Industries, and I didn't get a chance to go through much of it. But, they're probably unaware their goods are being used in this way. They're a publicly owned company. However, there's one majority shareholder. I couldn't find any information on him or her. I'm sure if something bad happens and word gets out, the company would suffer tremendous financial damages as a result."

"You've really done your homework." She was truly impressed. "If this Medical Research gig doesn't work out, you might want to transfer over to the Intelligence Department," she half-joked.

The man blushed at the compliment.

The department head wore his black hair in a modern cut, short on the sides, and slightly longer on top. He was tall, with smooth, ebony skin and friendly, green eyes.

Just from briefly speaking with him, Amari could tell he was incredibly dedicated to his work. She'd gone over and introduced Terrain, but somehow the conversation diverted to the information he dug up about the circuits he found earlier. Terrain was basically forced to watch on as she and Anatomy dominated the conversation.

"So, my friend here was interested in meeting you." She smiled, hoping he'd take the hint so she could finally slip away.

"Terrain, right?" He looked her over. "Are you on Wraith's infamous Alpha Team, too?"

Terrain's eyes lit up. "I am. I was on the mission to retrieve that hostage last night. I also fought with one of those guards—"

"Please excuse me, you two," Amari cut in.

Both nodded, with Anatomy slyly giving her the once over before turning his attention back to Terrain.

*Thank God!* She quickly made her way back over to her team. As she closed in on them, several women scattered out of the area, and she fought the urge to punch someone.

"What took you so long?" Renji curiously asked as she approached.

She returned to her drink. "It took a while to break the ice."

"Who are you trying to hook her up with?" Inspect asked with apparent interest as she took a break from arguing with Frisk.

"Anatomy," she responded quickly, praying the woman would have the sense to leave the subject alone.

"The guy that obviously wants to jump *your* bones?" She laughed, not paying any mind to the look of warning Frisk was flashing her.

Renji didn't miss a beat. "*Who?*"

"Don't worry about it, it's just one of Wraith's many admirers," Inspect casually said before returning her attention to Frisk. "No big deal. You'll get used to it. Not everyone here is afraid of you, Fang. Only *the most* confident men have the balls to approach our darling Alpha Team leader. Wouldn't you agree, *Frisk?*"

Grabbing Inspect's wrist, Frisk roughly led her over to another section of the bar.

"A past relationship?" Renji whispered through clenched teeth.

"No, I just met him this afternoon. He worked on the hostage and the guards from last night. He debriefed me and Inspect on his findings today, and Inspect was convinced he was interested in me."

She cursed her boss' bluntness when his eyes flew over to the other side of the bar.

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Renji's arms possessively wrapped around his mate's waist as he scanned the crowd of people. *I just want to see what he looks like. That's all*, he tried to convince himself.

He found it odd someone would be stupid enough to express interest in Amari while he was around. Since his arrival on the base,

it was well known that she was his. And he didn't have to say one word to get his message across either, his presence was more than enough. If anyone were so brazen as to challenge him, directly or indirectly, there would be major problems. Luckily, for everyone, such an event had never occurred.

*Maybe it's a new recruit? That would certainly explain things.*

He didn't enter his relationship with Amari under any illusions. His woman was a beautiful, elite alpha female. He didn't kid himself, he knew full well that other men wanted her. He saw the way they looked at her when they didn't think he was watching, and he could catch the scent of their arousal in the air whenever she walked into a room.

He knew his intimidating presence was enough to deter most, but as much as he wanted to, he couldn't hover over her all day. Of course, there would always be those who seized upon an opportunity when she was alone. Just like this, Anatomy guy apparently did earlier today.

He released his hold on his mate and took a few steps toward the other side of the bar, unaware he was growling loudly.

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*Here we go.* Amari really didn't want any trouble tonight. She already knew Renji was still very new to the hardwired behavior that came along with being a mated wolf demon. The poor man was really struggling to control his overprotective instincts over the past six months.

And, as flattering as his possessiveness was sometimes, the last thing she wanted was a scene, or even worse, a fight, because he was put in a situation where he might not be able to stop what was purely instinctual behavior.

When his marking scent, a scent she'd only previously been exposed to during their shared intimate and loving moments, heavily flooded the air, she immediately understood that this time around, it was a warning, and the message was loud and clear.

She. Was. His.

Grabbing his arm, she tried to drag him somewhere else, heeding all the warning signs he was unconsciously giving.

"Hey! Where are we going?"

"Not sure yet." She pulled him in the opposite direction.

"Why?"

She suddenly wished she could summon her tracking powers and pinpoint Anatomy's location to make sure they were going as far away from him as possible. Unfortunately, Renji recently became able to sense this ability, and if she attempted to use it right now, he'd want to know who she was looking for.

She wondered what it would be like to track by smell as she approached the dance floor. "Dance with me," she demanded.

He wasn't falling for it. "You're trying to hide me, aren't you?"

"No, I'm trying to prevent problems." She squeezed his hand.

"And I really love dancing with you. So it's a win-win situation no matter how you look—"

Stopping in his tracks, he pulled her arm, forcing her to crash against his chest. He then lowered his mouth to her ear. "Just what problems do you think you're trying to prevent, my love?" His voice was borderline menacing.

*Here we fucking go.* Becoming flustered, she shouted, "A fight! Why else would you possibly be looking around for that guy?"

When he just blankly stared at her, she swore she was going to pull her hair out.

"Look, I'm trying to be patient and understanding here. I just want to enjoy you right now. Not argue."

"I wasn't looking to start a fight! I just wanted to see what he looked like, that's all. If he really is interested in you, then I want to make sure I know his face. Give me a little credit here. I'm not as much of a psycho as you make me out to be."

"Then, you might want to see a doctor because your marking scent seems to be going a little haywire."

When his brows furrowed at the comment, she rolled her eyes dramatically. "Too bad, the guy with the sharpest sense of smell isn't able to smell himself."

"Does it smell different in some way?" he curiously asked as the anger left his face.

"Yes, it was pretty strong back there. You would have cleared out the entire male population of the bar if I'd let you stay there any longer than I did," she sarcastically said.

Renji smiled, seemingly pleased with himself.

*Oh, for God's sake!* Turning, she once again pulled him to the dance floor. Luckily, this time around, he offered her very little resistance.

Following her through the crowd, he wrapped his big body around her as they swayed in unison to the music's throbbing tempo.

"Was that so hard?" she shouted near his ear as she pressed her body flush against his.

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"Where did Fang and Wraith go?" Mystic innocently asked as she looked around for her friends. "They wouldn't have left without saying goodbye."

"She dragged Fang over to the dance floor, most likely to try and distract him." Frisk's eyes flicked over to Inspect. "You can't say stupid shit like that around him," he warned. "Ever."

"Stupid shit?" she repeated, genuinely confused.

"It's probably not a good idea to mention that someone might be interested in Wraith around Fang," Trace supplied. "Even if it's joking around. He's extremely protective of her."

"Protective? Or *controlling*?" she angrily asked, becoming a little protective herself.

"He's *not* controlling. It's not at all like that," Mystic chided. "I'm sure you're aware he's a wolf demon and that he's mated with Wraith."

"Yes, I'm aware of what he is. The General filled me in on all of the 'non-human, werewolf' specifics when he joined."

"He's just trying to keep her his and keep her safe. He's acting in a way that's natural to his own race. He's certainly a little over the top sometimes, but that's only because we can't help but judge him by our own human standards. He earnestly tries to control his impulses around her, and he's very good to her."

"Which leads me to my next point," Frisk continued. "Don't get any ideas in your head about ever mentioning *anything* about her past relationships either. *Any* of them," he emphasized as his eyes flared in warning. "Rai doesn't believe he can handle it, and from



what I've seen over the past few months, neither do I. The last thing we need is *that* guy losing control and killing somebody."

"Christ. I guess I didn't realize Fang was *that*... sensitive?" Inspect said, struggling to find the correct word. "How's Wraith been putting up with it?"

"She actually deals with it quite well. She's overly patient and understanding with him. The behavior frustrates them both, but they always work it out. They genuinely love each other," Mystic happily said as her eyes flicked over to Quake.

He winked at her. "Best feeling in the world,"

The group's heartfelt chat was interrupted when an ecstatic Terrain ran over to them.

"Guess who has a date with the head of the Medical Research Department?"

Frisk rolled his eyes.

"That's great, Terrain!" Quake said. "Where's the lucky guy?"

"He just left."

*Anatomy just left. He and Terrain will be going on a date. Good work on hooking them up!* Mystic abruptly announced into Wraith's consciousness. *It's safe to come back here, just in case you were wondering.*

The Alpha Team leader chuckled. *Good for her. I'm glad. And, thanks for the head's up.*

A few moments later, Wraith and Fang rejoined the team. Both were flushed and out of breath but smiling happily. Fang's arms were wrapped around her waist from behind, and she was leaning into him, her hands resting on his arms.

"Hey, Wraith! You'll never guess what just happened!"

Wraith's eyes fluttered over to Terrain.

"This weekend, Anatomy is taking me out to dinner off the base!" She wasn't able to keep the joy out of her voice. "If everything works out, maybe we can do a double sometime?"

She patted her shoulder. "Ah. Sure. Maybe one day. But, for now, try not to get too far ahead of yourself. Just go out and have fun. See where you end up."

"Where *is* this... sexy son of a bitch?" Fang asked, repeating the earlier statement about the man. "I'd *love* to meet him," he said in a sly voice as Wraith noticeably tensed in his arms.

"He left a little while ago."

"That's a *real* shame."

He was swiftly elbowed in the ribs.

"Is everything okay with you two?" Mystic wondered.

"Wonderful. Everything is just wonderful!" he answered, rubbing his side.

## Chapter 8

At the crack of dawn, Amari was suited up in her heavy sparring gear, and ready to kick some ass. Two weeks ago she'd offered to train with Inspect. Taking their little conversation to heart, the woman reserved the base's training center so they could spar.

*It's been years since we've trained together,* she thought, feeling excited.

Inspect was Amari's Krav Maga and Taekwondo instructor when she first joined *ROOT*, ten years ago. The woman was a master in both styles and taught her everything she knew about hand-to-hand combat. No matter how much she initially struggled through the brutal training, Inspect never once gave up on her little protégé.

"Ready, agent Wraith?" a commanding voice boomed out from behind her.

She smiled. "You've been out of action for quite some time. I'll make sure to take it easy on you today."

Falling into her fighting stance, Inspect said, "Don't get cocky, brat. The arrogant are the first to die on the battlefield. Don't think for one second that I haven't kept up on my dedication to the arts. I'm not going to hold back, so you better fight me as if your life depends on it."

Amari's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "Good. It's been a while since I've let loose. Let's do this!" She, too, fell into her stance.

As if a silent bell rang to signal the start of the fight, both women charged each other.

Inspect went in low, sweeping her leg out in an attempt to break her stance. But, Amari efficiently managed to flip over her, avoiding the attack altogether. However, the moment she landed, Inspect's arm swung out and grabbed onto her ankle, and in one quick motion, the department head turned her body, taking Amari's with it and slamming her into the wall.

Hard.

The sound of the impact loudly echoed throughout the room.

Recovering quickly, she pushed her body along with the momentum of the crash and used it to charge her boss, kicking her leg up in a high crescent kick.

When Inspect dodged, like she knew she would, she fell right into a carefully laid trap. Rotating her torso, the Alpha Team leader landed a jolting punch against her cheek.

The woman stumbled before rolling back and springing up again, charging Amari and slamming her stomach with her shoulder. Inspect grunted as she then picked her up by the waist and arched back, pounding her into the floor.

Struggling, she tried to force the air back into her winded lungs as pain burned down her spine. Lifting her legs, she caught Inspect's neck between her thighs. She then clenched her muscles against her boss' jugular vein and twisted her body to the side, taking the woman's head along with the movement.

She wasn't expecting the sharp pain that shot into her thigh when Inspect bit her. "You crazy bitch!"

The bite had the intended effect, and she reflexively eased her hold. And one small oversight was all the department head needed.

The woman shot over her body, straddled her, and punched her in the mouth.

Not thinking, Amari drove her fist between the woman's legs, targeting the most sensitive bundle of female nerves hidden there.

Inspect screamed and curled over herself in reflex, falling onto her side.

Focusing, Amari jumped to her feet and kicked her in the stomach, watching as the woman choked back bile. She then lifted her right leg, planning to land a downward kick directly into her nose.

But, Inspect rolled over, grabbed onto her one rooted ankle, and pulled.

As she fell, Inspect forcibly swung her own leg out and landed a hard kick right to her chin.

Seeing stars, she fell backward.

*A perfectly executed KO*, she thought as she struggled to breathe. Her world was becoming fuzzy.

"Better move, or I'm really going to fuck you up!" She bolted to her feet and charged. "Wraith! Work through it! You're better than this! Let the fuck go!"

Stumbling, she prayed she could maintain her balance. Breathing hard, she lifted her hands and took a defensive stance, bracing against Inspect's next attack.

The woman's legs flew up, assaulting her with a fast series of kicks to each of her sides. When she used her hands to guard her ribs, Inspect's fist once again slammed into her mouth.

Spitting blood this time, Amari forced her legs up and catapulted them into her opponent's chest, effectively blasting her away. The move catapulted her boss into the wall, and her head roughly banged into the solid structure.

Amari sadistically smiled as she crumpled to the floor.

"That's it. Use me. Take it all out on me, Rai. I'm tough enough to handle it," Inspect sputtered, her breath ragged and harsh as she quickly got back onto her feet. "All the bullshit you carry around with you, weighing you down, let it all loose on me!" She smiled, very obviously enjoying the shared violence between them.

Embracing her words and finally letting go, Amari screamed as she charged forth.

She called forth all the pain she felt when she lost her friends in her past life, and all the hardships she encountered as she rose through the ranks of *ROOT* in this one. She released all the constant stress of trying to maintain peace in her work and romantic life. She pictured the hostage screwing Renji in her dream, and she imagined Emica's smug face when she tried to shoot him in the head six months ago.

She channeled all her frustrations, anger, and insecurities, using them as a source of raw strength as she slammed her fist into Inspect's stomach.

The department head savagely smiled. She had blocked the punch, but the sheer force of it made her stumble as she struggled to recapture her footing.

\*\*\*

The two women that reserved the sparing area were way over their time allowance. A small crowd gathered to watch, yet none dared to interrupt them.

The fighters were bloodied, bruised, and covered in sweat. Both had their hair braided tightly to their scalps and wore red sparring gear over their heads and workout clothing.

One of the onlookers shook his head as he watched the two highly ranked leaders fight each other with all they had.

Lifting his phone, he took a picture of the two women and sent it to Alpha Team's shared message chat, finding no caption was necessary.

\*\*\*

Early in the morning, Renji woke to the sound of his phone ping. Rolling over to check the message, he cursed the fact that *ROOT* agents were always on call and at the mercy of their phones.

He cracked open one eye and grumpily glanced over the picture Frisk sent to the Alpha Team group message. It was a picture of two women fighting, apparently to the death. Maybe it was the haze of sleep, or perhaps it was the condition the combatants were in, but it took him more than a few seconds to realize that one of the women was Amari.

*What the fuck is going on?* his mind screamed when it finally made the connection, and he bolted out of bed. As he scrambled to dress into his black tactical clothing, the group message exploded with various comments from the other team members.

He quickly typed, not sparing any time to read any of the comments.

*"Where are you?"*

Frisk quickly replied.

*"The training center."*

He frowned, remembering Amari mentioned she'd be leaving early that morning to work out with Inspect.

*Work out my ass!* He raced out of his apartment and over the grounds.

At his high speed, it only took him ten minutes to get inside the base's training center. Once there, it became apparent he wasn't the only one getting out of bed to see the commotion.

Terrain and Trace stood by Frisk, their grey eyes were focused on the melee taking place in front of them. And Mystic and Quake's

scents were also in the air, obviously making their way through the crowd as well.

Pushing his way through the sea of onlookers, he only stopped to take in the horrific sight before him.

In the high ceilinged building, on the padded white floor that spanned the length of an American football field, Amari was a bloody mess but was smiling from ear-to-ear as she worked to beat the ever-loving crap out of Inspect.

Their department head looked no worse for wear.

Before he could take off and stop the fight, a substantial hand came down on his shoulder, anchoring him in place.

"She's enjoying it. Don't you dare interrupt her," Quake seriously said.

"Are you out of your mind?" His eyes flew back to his mate's bloodied and eerily, joyous face. Before he could fight Quake's hold, another hand grabbed his arm. This one belonged to Mystic.

"Fight those instincts of yours for a few more minutes. They're almost done," she instructed. "I won't let you break up this fight."

"What the hell is wrong with you people?"

He was about to break free when yet another hand found its way over to him, pinning down his one free shoulder.

"You're not going anywhere. This is good training for you as well, Fang. Stand there and *control yourself* as you watch your woman kick some ass. She doesn't need you to jump in and rescue her. That's an order," Frisk demanded. "And don't worry. They're not going to kill each other."

He tensed. His instincts were screaming at him to pull free. Desperate, he took several calming breaths and willed his inner wolf to relax.

It wasn't working.

Looking on, through an internal tug of war, he watched as Amari landed a 360 kick to the side of Inspect's head. The woman went down, and his mate straddled her, ruthlessly punching her several times in the face.

He had seen her fight before, but it was always calm, controlled, and efficient. This time was very different. It was raw, angry, and dirty. The smell of blood in the air was turning his stomach. However, he noticed a sweet, musky scent was entwined within.

*She's...*

Apparently, Amari was *very* turned on right now.

He sure as hell didn't know what to make of the revelation. He was fighting with everything he had not to go to her. Yet now, his body was responding to the situation with a much different sense of urgency.

Suddenly, Inspect's fist made hard contact with Amari's jaw, and the Alpha Team leader collapsed on top of her. The department head's hands then snaked around her waist and slowly rolled her away, making no attempt to get up or further attack.

Instead, Inspect laid in her position on the floor, her chest heaving for air, while a broad, satiated smile occupied her face.

It was at this moment all the hands holding Renji in place finally let go, and he flew forward.

He was utterly speechless when he dropped down to Amari's side and tried to examine her injuries. But, he was relieved to see she was still conscious. However, the grin occupying her face was unnerving. The moment she noticed he was there, the eerie smile quickly faded.

"That was one hell of a fight!" Frisk's voice was full of pride as he leaned down and pulled Inspect to her feet. Briefly, his eyes flicked over to Amari, and he nodded, silently congratulating her on her part in scrimmage.

*Everyone here has lost their fucking minds!* he thought in horror as he tried to lift his mate into his arms.

"No, I can stand on my own. I just need a little help getting up." She sat up and offered her hand, clearly expecting him to pull her to her feet.

He growled in disapproval but complied. He then watched as she comfortably balanced on her feet and made quick work of freeing herself from her sparing gear. Once the task was completed, she made her way in the direction of the showers.

However, her movements were roughly halted as he grabbed her hand.

To say he was pissed off would've been an understatement.

He was absolutely livid.

And yet... he was immensely proud of her. He wanted to scream at her, he wanted to break something, and for some reason, he



wanted to make love to her until she was too tired to call out his name. The strange combination of emotions left him speechless.

"Please don't be mad. I'm fine, I promise. I feel really good right now, lighter and cleaner in a way," she said through blood-stained lips.

He paid only a moment of attention to the words before he quickly leaned forward and silenced her with his mouth. Hungrily twisting his tongue against hers, he savored her copper taste while he wrapped her tightly in his arms.

The scene brought forth whistles and hollers from the crowd.

\*\*\*

*This was so not the reaction I was expecting.* Amari hurriedly broke the kiss. "Not here," she whispered as she took in the rich smell of freshly cut wood and Earth that was Renji's marking scent.

He was looking down at her as though he wanted to devour her.

Grabbing his hand, she pulled him to the far corner of the building. Once there, she glanced around. When sure no one was near, she pushed open the door to the stairwell and pulled him in behind her.

The stairwell was a place no one ever used, and it was the perfect place for a few minutes of privacy. However, when the door closed behind them, the couple abruptly froze. All plans of their sexual rendezvous quickly becoming forgotten.

Staring in shock at the heated scene before her, she willed her body to leave, but it seemed her brain abandoned her.

She was sure the same was true of Renji as they both mutually struggled to understand the meaning behind the two entwined, naked bodies standing directly in front of them.

Frisk and Inspect apparently had the same exact idea about the unused stairwell. And at this very moment, all four sets of eyes were staring at each other, equally horrified.

"Sorry!" She turned her head and tried to forget the images of naked flesh standing before her. She willed her body to move, but the most she was able to manage was a few steps back into Renji's hard chest.

Pushing against him, she hoped he'd somehow get them out of there. But, it seemed he was just as unable to form a coherent thought as she was.

"Get out!" Inspect shouted. She was furious.

Finally, something clicked, and she turned to leave. Pushing Renji back, she dragged him out of the stairwell and back into the sparing area. As soon as the door closed behind them, she leaned against the wall. Her heart was slamming in her chest.

"What the hell was *that*? Inspect and Frisk—"

"Are apparently together." Renji snickered, as he, in one movement, swooped down and threw her over his shoulder.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

"Looks like we have no other choice but to stop home real quick," he coyly said.

"Oh." She giggled.

## Chapter 9

Anatomy was entirely out of patience as he angrily scanned the Reconnaissance Department's lobby.

He was only a month into his new position as the head of Medical Research, and he was brand new to the South Korean base. The former head of his department was stationed with him on *ROOT's* Russian base. Unfortunately, his prior boss turned out to be a dirty agent who almost succeeded in designing a biological weapon capable of wiping out the entire human race.

When all was said and done, and Anatomy was promoted, he wanted to be transferred to an entirely new environment, one that didn't hold so many bad memories of his predecessor. And so, he'd chosen the South Korean base as it was the location the General currently resided in.

Unfortunately, the new site came with one other department head, and the woman was absolutely infuriating.

"How rude can a person possibly be?" He once again looked at his watch.

He was supposed to be meeting with Inspect, and *she was supposed* to be meeting him in the lobby of her floor. He had been waiting for over fifteen minutes.

*Looks like I need to try to find her*, he realized, as he wondered which direction he should take off in.

\*\*\*

Renji had just delivered a cleaned up Amari to her office and was feeling pretty good. He'd made love to her several times that morning, only breaking to wash her and tend to her wounds before they both needed to get to work and start the day. After all the sex they just had, his earlier frazzled nerves finally felt somewhat settled and relaxed.

*In another few hours, once all the swelling sets in, she's going to be sore as hell.*

Doing his best to push his worries to the side, he set off to pick up his wolf pack's pups. They were now five months old, and he wanted to start desensitizing them to noise and people.

Once he arrived at his department's main lobby, he accidentally made eye contact with a man who was wearing the Medical Research Department's signature lab coat. The guy was obviously lost and hoping someone would stop and give him directions.

*Won't be me.* Diverting his eyes, he pushed through to the elevators.

"Excuse me!"

*Fuck!* He debated ignoring him, but the man called out to him again.

"Would you mind helping me for just a moment? I just need to be pointed in the direction of your department head," he politely said.

He sighed. "You're looking for Inspect then." He finally turned to address him and gave the man a once over.

The guy was obviously the 'pretty boy' type and stood only a few inches shorter than him. His black hair was neatly trimmed, shorter on the sides and slightly longer on top. His teeth were perfectly aligned and white. His green eyes were guarded but warm, and they really stood out against his black skin.

As he was wearing a lab coat, he was either a doctor or a scientist, as the Medical Research Department was made up of both.

*Definitely the kind of guy a girl would love to bring home to meet their mother.* "She's going to be all the way on the other side of this floor. Make a left here and then make your first right. Follow the aisle between the cubicles all the way until you can't go straight anymore. You'll end up right in front of her office."

"Left, first right, straight," the man repeated, memorizing the directions.

"Yup," he drawled as he turned to be on his way.

"Thank you very much," the man earnestly said as he set off.

\*\*\*

Amari had been on the phone with one of the agents from the Intelligence Department for the past hour, and she swore she was about to lose her damn mind.

Two weeks ago, with Inspect's permission, she'd put in an investigative request into Tsuki Industries' circuit sales. She wanted

to see if they'd be able to find any purchase fluctuations from the past year in hopes that it might provide her with a lead in the ongoing Ultimate Soldier problem.

"I understand this is a lot of information to pick through. But has there been a new buyer in the past year? There has to be some kind of connection. Can you find out if the circuits we pulled were stolen?" She paused as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. "We tried. All the serial numbers were scratched off. There's no other information other than the emblem on the hardware." She huffed in frustration. "Understood. Please provide me with all the information you pulled. I'd like to go through it myself."

She hung up the phone.

*There has to be a connection somewhere*, she thought before a loud rapping on her open-door broke her concentration.

"Agent Wraith, may I come in?" came Anatomy's smooth, low voice.

"Sure."

The man quickly entered but came to a complete halt as he looked at her. "Oh, my God! Your face!" He hurriedly took a few steps toward her but froze in front of her desk as if unsure of what to do.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just got out of a meeting with Inspect, and she looked just as chewed up as you do. She told me you two had a combat session this morning. I just finished treating her, and I wanted to check on you as well to see if you were also as badly injured..." he trailed off, studying her. "Is this how agents in the Reconnaissance Department train? This seems a bit... excessive."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." She attempted a reassuring smile. But, the action split the scab on her lower lip and drove a heated throbbing pain through her slowly swelling face.

He shook his head. "Come here and let me take a look at you, please."

*Always so well-mannered and polite.* She blotted her bleeding lip with a tissue. "No, really. I'm okay. I don't want to trouble you."

"You're not troubling me. I went into the medical field specifically to help the injured. You *are* injured, Wraith. Please, let me take a look at you."

Getting up, she walked over to the other side of her desk, prompting him to study her with a clinical eye.

"May I please see your hands?"

When she nodded, he took them, rubbing his thumb over her swollen knuckles. "This is going to feel warm, but it won't be painful. I ask that you please try to relax," he softly said as his hands bathed hers in a barely visible green light.

She watched on as her cuts and swollen knuckles slowly healed right before her very eyes. The treatment only took a few seconds before her hands were as good as new.

Staring at her fingers in awe, she said, "Is this your gift?"

"Yes, I guess you could say I was predisposed for this type of work," he offhandedly said. "Now, would you also allow me to heal your face?"

"Sure. I'd appreciate it, actually."

Anatomy's hands gently wrapped around her cheeks, and he tilted her head up to his as he focused his extraordinary abilities on her face.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed into the soft warmth of his powers as they coasted over her skin. The heat was soothing, and she could feel the tenderness of her bruising instantly begin to subside.

\*\*\*

Renji re-entered his department's floor with two adolescent wolf pups. Both were wearing protective vests and fought with the gear the entire walk there. Today's goal was to expose them to the noise and various scents found in this type of environment.

After a brief stay in the Reconnaissance Department, he'd be taking them outside for a mock search and rescue mission before dropping them back off again and spending the rest of his day doing some overdue paperwork.

He also wanted to check on Amari.

His mind briefly fluttered back to her injuries. He knew he shouldn't bother her, but he just wanted to see her and make sure she was still alright.

Knowing she'd probably need an ice pack right about now, he went over to the floor's kitchenette. The area had a stale smell to it, marking a long history of reheated foods. Although the space was well kept and sterilized daily, he had, up until this point, avoided going in there.

From right to left, there was a small four-seater table in the corner of the room, a microwave and a hot plate neatly centered on a length of counters, and — *Bingo!* — a refrigerator.

He yanked on the machine's left-sided panel, opening the freezer and grabbing several ice packs. Once in hand, he and the pups set off in the direction of Amari's office. Halfway there, a face he was hoping to avoid quickly came into view.

As Frisk met his eyes across the path between the many desks, Renji hesitated. He wanted to turn around to avoid him, but Alpha Team's second in command apparently had other ideas and walked in his direction.

"Fang! I need to talk to you," he commanded as he quickly approached.

*This is awkward.* He tried not to remember the sight of Frisk thrusting between Inspect's legs earlier that morning. "I'm actually busy right now." He pointed to the wolves hoping they would suffice as an excuse.

"That's great. So am I. But, you will talk to me. *Now.*" He pulled him out of the aisle and off to the side. "What you saw earlier..." he trailed off in a barely audible whisper.

Renji saw where this was going and answered the unspoken request for him. "I didn't see anything. Have no idea what you're talking about."

Alpha Team's second in command eyed him suspiciously for a moment, apparently trying to figure out if he should trust him.

He must have passed the test because he took a step back and nodded, his arm sweeping out in invitation for him to leave.

"Thanks." He made his way passed him.

"Don't mention it. Are you off to see Wraith?"

He shook the ice packs in his fist. "Yeah, she's probably going to need some ice for her face."

"I'll come with you. I want to talk to her about... *that* thing as well."

"No need. She didn't see anything either. There's nothing to talk about."

Frisk grew silent, but much to his annoyance, followed along anyway. When Amari's door came into view, he, as usual, barged right in.

The last thing he'd remember that day was the serene look on her beautiful face as she very obviously readied herself to kiss the man he'd helped earlier in the lobby.

\*\*\*

Amari had just closed her eyes, surrendering to the comforting feel of Anatomy's treatment when, without warning, her protective powers forcibly exploded outwards, covering her and Anatomy within a robust, blue shield.

The action startled the hell out of her. She didn't have a chance to scan around for the source of the threat. Instead, it made itself known when a clawed hand came into her peripheral vision and savagely slashed Anatomy's throat.

The department head was roughly flung back by the motion while she reactively forced her powers outward, adding all the spiritual energy she could muster into fortifying the shield.

She could hear Frisk's voice screaming out behind her. "Get out *now!* RUN!"

When she turned her head, she saw Renji engulfed in a black aura. He was in full bloodlust form. His teeth and claws were fully elongated, his eyes were the telltale red, and he was loudly snarling.

Frisk jumped onto his back and tried to restrain him. "You need to run, Rai! Get the fuck out of here!"

In a stupor, she watched as the man she loved more than life itself easily twisted out of the hold, and with one smooth motion, viciously slashed Frisk's face with six-inch claws, sending him flying into her shelf.



The tall mahogany piece of furniture that lined her wall groaned and splintered upon impact. A river of papers, photo frames, and knickknacks spilled over Frisk and onto the floor in a messy heap.

As he struggled to get back to his feet, the wolf demon savagely sunk his talons into the exposed flesh of his neck and used the hold to lift him high into the air.

*Move, Amari! He's going to kill him, you have to move!*

A few seconds that felt like an eternity passed before her body sprang into action, running over to the men and grabbing Renji's raised arm.

"Let him go. *Now!*" She pulled on his arm with all of her weight but wasn't able to lower his hold in the slightest.

He didn't seem to notice her. He instead began smiling, purposefully giving his victim a full show of sharp teeth while he lifted his free claw into the air.

This was a move she was extremely familiar with.

He was going to plunge his clawed hand into Frisk's heart.

"Fang! Stop!" Throwing her blue protective shield up over Frisk, she let go of her hold on his arm. She then grabbed onto his free claw with both hands and positioned it over her heart. "To kill him, you'd have to kill me, too. Is that what you want? Do you want me to die?"

Glowing, crimson eyes flicked down to her, and she met them full-on, challenging him.

Without any warning, he twisted his torso and swiftly pulled his hand free from her grasp. The movement took her second in command's dangling form along with it.

For a moment, she considered calling upon her purification powers but was afraid she might accidentally kill him. "God damn it! Stop!" she screamed as her mind rambled. *There has to be something I can do! What the hell can I do?*

In the past, her voice and touch were always enough to get through to him. But this time, it wasn't working.

*He hasn't attempted to hurt me yet.* The revelation did nothing to comfort her. *I need to find another way to get through to him! But how?*

The clock was ticking. The shield she had on Frisk wasn't going to last forever.

As if testing the waters, a clawed hand catapulted forward, crashing harshly into the man's chest. However, it wasn't able to break through the shield. Unfortunately, this served to infuriate Renji further. He drew his hand back yet again, but this time, it was bathed in yellow, crackling light.

*Electricity? Are you fucking kidding me?*

Internally cursing demons' natural abilities in using elemental powers, she closed her eyes and desperately called upon her spiritual energy while focusing on Renji's essence.

Summoning all the power left at her disposal, she launched her tracking powers, forcibly trying to use them to connect with his soul.

A thick cord of invisible power snaked forth, instantly twisting around his dark energy and dissipating it. Once the black aura was gone, a blue glow of light emanated from his body instead.

Somehow this seemed to be enough, and Renji dropped Frisk before crumpling onto the floor, unconscious.

Running over to the men, she scrambled to tend to Frisk's injuries first. As she dropped to her knees by his side, she noticed his face was drenched in blood, and she could barely make out any of his features. The sight terrified her.

"Frisk! I need you to talk to me! Frisk!"

"I'm alive," he grumbled, allowing her to wrap her arms around him in a tight hug.

"I'm going to get you help. Don't worry," she promised. "I'll take care of you. I can fix this," she rambled as she desperately looked around for a way to stop the bleeding.

A calm voice behind her interrupted her escalating hysterics. "Let me look at him."

She looked up into Anatomy's serious face. "Are you—"

"Alright?" He bent down and examined Frisk's neck and face.

She nodded, her eyes wide.

"Only thanks to you. I'd be dead if it weren't for the shield you threw up." He fished out his cell phone and made an emergency phone call to his department.

In a few moments, a flood of lab coats burst through the large crowd gathering outside her office and surrounded the two downed men.

As the medical team removed Renji from the room, she called out to them, "That man is a wolf demon, and needs to be sedated, *heavily!*"

She wasn't taking any more chances with him.

Anatomy's eyes studied her for a moment, apparently intrigued. "A wolf demon?" he repeated. "Well then, agent Wraith, I need you to tell me everything you know about what it is to be a wolf demon so I can ensure we treat him correctly."

Lowering her eyes, she hurriedly attempted to explain everything she knew about wolf demons from start to finish, hoping she didn't leave anything vital out.

"His name is Fang, and, in addition to what I've told you, all of the information we have about his people can be accessed in the *ROOT* database as well. Feel free to investigate further, just in case I absentmindedly left anything out."

"This is most interesting," he muttered. "A completely different species. I've never encountered anything like this."

"Enzyme used to be a wolf demon, too," she informed him. "We just didn't find out about it until much later."

His eyes widened, apparently fascinated by the revelation. "Agent Wraith, what drove that man..." he hesitated, attempting to recall Renji's codename. "What drove agent Fang to attack us?" He motioned between himself and Frisk.

A flurry of activity kicked up outside. Peering out the door, she noticed General Hush and Inspect were running toward her office.

*Here we go.* Her eyes flicked down to the floor.

There was a cracked picture frame at her feet, obviously broken in the recent melee. In the photo, she was sitting at a restaurant in town, wearing a red sundress and a silly birthday hat. A small cupcake with pink icing and a matching candle was on the table in front of her. She was smiling for the camera while Renji's left arm was tightly wrapped around her shoulders. He was in a black T-shirt, hair loose and laughing, the tips of his fangs peeking out from his upper lip as he was about to lean in and plant a kiss on her cheek.

The glass protecting the picture was split right down the middle, separating them with a thin gray line. She didn't know why, but the memory felt as defiled as the frame was.

Taking a preparative breath, she tried to educate Anatomy on everything she knew about the mating habits and behaviors of wolf demons before she was, very obviously, going to be dragged away by her superiors.

## Chapter 10

Nicolas was a man who'd seen many horrors in his short life. Born and raised by Spanish immigrants to the United States, he grew up on the chaotic streets of the Bronx, New York. A prankster by nature, his early childhood was filled with many fun memories. Life was easy back then. Because of his gifts, schooling was a breeze, along with anything else he pursued.

However, all that changed for him on 9/11.

The tragedy he personally experienced that day changed him. Wanting to fight back against the evil in the world, he enlisted in the United States Marine force the very next day. Unfortunately, his many tours of service only served to open his eyes to the deep sea of corruption that existed, not only in his own government, but worldwide.

It made him sick.

So when a *ROOT* recruiter approached him on an assignment in Syria, he meticulously thought it over and happily accepted. That was over a decade ago. Since that time, and during his employment with the organization, he really thought he had seen it all.

Until today.

Nicolas, codenamed Frisk, frowned as he studied his teammate's supine form from the corner of the darkened hospital room.

Agent Fang was heavily sedated, and the asshole almost seemed at peace in his drug-induced sleep.

From the very first moment Frisk met him, he instantly knew the guy was trouble. There was always a tremendous, menacing feel surrounding Fang. The predatory shift of his gait, the rumbling way he spoke, the way those slitted, black pupils of his reflexively narrowed when he looked at you. You knew the danger he posed on a primal level — an unarmed hiker accidentally coming upon a full-grown grizzly bear in the woods — kind of level.

Fight, flight, or die kind of shit.

While females seemed to be mesmerized by the savage ticking time bomb, the males on the base instinctually knew to keep the fuck away from him. Alpha Team's werewolf... wolf demon... whatever the fuck he was... wasn't a damn pet. And he knew full well that their

wild animal wasn't a being that could ever be tamed, regardless of how hard Wraith tried to convince everyone otherwise.

Despite all his concerns, the man's saving grace, up until this point, was his utter devotion to Wraith. But now, as Frisk looked down at him, he determined Fang's feelings for her seemed more like a psychosis than anything he would ever attribute to love. His obsession with her wasn't a healthy one, and it was a giant liability to the safety and wellbeing of everyone around her. If she hadn't managed to find a way to disable him when she did, Frisk knew he would be lying face up in a body bag right now.

He watched as the demon's eyelids slowly cracked open, and he blinked a few times, staring blankly at the ceiling. Minutes ticked by before his head slowly rolled to the side in his direction.

\*\*\*

Renji's mind swam in a heavy mist of confusion. It was hard to form a coherent thought, and it was especially challenging to open his eyes. His current situation felt oddly familiar to one he found himself in six months earlier before he joined Alpha Team.

He tried to remember how he ended up in this predicament, but nothing was coming to mind. Giving up, he struggled to open his eyes, and he celebrated his success when the ceiling of his room began to come into view. He stayed this way, slowly blinking, as the world around him slowly came into focus.

*Where am I?*

He somehow managed to shift his head to the side and was greeted with the outline of Frisk's shadowed form menacingly leaning against the wall, in the dark, on the far side of the room.

"Are you awake?" he spat, never leaving the darkened corner.

He tried to speak, but all he was able to manage was a gurgled grunt.

"Do you know why you're here?" The man's voice was full of venom.

Trying once again to respond, he was a bit more successful this time around. "Where. Is. Here?" he croaked.

"You're in the base's hospital, and a special sedation cocktail is pumping into you. We took a page right out of the Tokyo police

force's wolf demon handbook just for you," he sarcastically said. "Chapter 1: How to stop and prevent Demonic Bloodlust. Items you'll need: Tranquilizers and a shit ton of sedatives. Dosage Requirement: When the son of a bitch drops to the floor, you'll know you've administered the correct amount," he snickered. However, the humor that always occupied his voice was now gone.

"What. Happened?" His mind was still cloudy, but he was slowly becoming terrified.

"You. Happened. You truly lost your ever-loving mind!" he shouted. "You know, Fang, you might not believe this, but I really wanted you to work out. I wanted you to prove me wrong about being a danger to this team. I really wanted to believe in you, damn it. But, you blew it!"

"Wraith? Where's Wraith?" he shakily asked. *What the hell did I do?*

"She's with Inspect in General Hush's office. Most likely, getting *her* ass handed to her. You are *her* responsibility."

Upon hearing this, his adrenaline began to spike. Using it to his advantage, he tried to sit up. But, the action made him dizzy, and he fell back down on the mattress.

After a few moments of fighting his way through the sedatives he spoke, clearly this time, "Tell me what happened!"

Frisk charged out of his darkened corner and roughly grabbed him by the tactical vest. He pulled him up, so their noses were touching.

At the sight of the decrepit and raw state of his face, Renji's eyes widened in shock. It was covered in stitches and butterfly clips that forcibly closed four deep gashes, which started from his left ear and stretched across the width of his face, ending at his right cheek and barely missing his eye. Five puncture wounds on his neck were also sewn shut.

He reeked of blood, sweat, and antiseptic.

"I told you. *You* are what happened! You tried to kill the head of the Medical Research Department. In your rampage, you not only attempted to kill me, but you also managed to destroy Wraith's office. Do you seriously not remember any of that?" he screamed. "You're fucking nuts!"

His heart slammed in his chest. He closed his eyes and concentrated, scrambling to remember something, anything. His efforts were rewarded with the image of a man cradling Amari's face as she closed her eyes in anticipation of his kiss.

Rage exploded through him.

As a dense, black aura began to surround his body, Frisk leaned over and, with his free hand, turned up the IV administering the sedatives to full blast.

Renji's eyelids drooped as his aura dissipated.

"Before you pass out, I need you to burn my words into that primitive fucking brain of yours," Frisk spat. "I know what it looked like, but that man was actually healing Wraith's face. He was helping her – the woman you supposedly love. They weren't doing a damn thing more than that! She didn't fucking betray your stupid ass."

He ended the statement by releasing his hold on the vest, dropping Renji's full weight back on the mattress. He then stood there, watching as his eyes slowly fluttered closed.

"It'd only take a moment to break your neck," he whispered as he looked down at him. "But, you're not even fucking worth the time," he muttered after a few moments of thought. However, as he was leaving the room, something appeared to occur to him.

Once again leaning over Renji's vulnerable form, he slowly removed his gloves and placed his hands on his face. The contact only lasted a moment before he abruptly turned the IV drip back down and stomped off, leaving the room.

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"He assaulted two agents, Wraith, one of which was his superior!" Hush's angry voice boomed across his office. "He's a danger to others. It's best to suspend him for a time and reassign him to the Assassination Department."

Amari didn't know what to say, she was scrambling to find a way to fix everything, but was finding it to be too difficult. "He just needs another chance, Hush. Please, I'm begging you. I agree with temporarily suspending him. But, we can follow the time with a probationary period instead of reassignment to another department."



Hush slammed his fist on his desk, effectively silencing her. "If Fang actually managed to kill Anatomy and Frisk, which is exactly what he was attempting to do, would you still feel the same way?"

"No. No, I wouldn't," she firmly said. "If he killed them, I'd agree with your decision to remove him from Alpha Team and the Reconnaissance Department permanently."

The General laughed. "So, if he *killed* two agents in cold blood, *then* you think it'd be appropriate to reassign him?" he scolded in disbelief. "I'm afraid that if he *murdered* Anatomy and Frisk, he'd then be our prisoner," he bit out. "You're not thinking very clearly, are you, agent Wraith?" His voice dropped to a whisper as he studied her.

Anger washed through her. *He's right*, she acquiesced, remembering the situation that brought her here.

The memory of the events quickly became suffocating, and she was somewhat grateful to be ripped out of her musings by the rage coming through the Hush's harsh voice.

"I asked both of you if your romantic relationship was going to get in the way of the work! You both assured me it wouldn't be a problem!" he spat. "Yet, nothing could be further from the truth—"

A knock on the door interrupted the lecture.

"I'm in a meeting!"

The door flew open in response, with Anatomy rudely forcing his way into the room.

Anatomy accompanied Inspect and Hush when they took Amari back to the General's office. But Hush ordered that he stay outside until he finished speaking to both women about their new Alpha Team situation.

The healer looked over the meeting's occupants before holding the General's eyes. "I think I should have a say." He folded his arms across his chest.

*He's apparently been eavesdropping.*

"Who in the hell do you think you're speaking to?" Hush ran a hand through his hair in disbelief. "All you agents have become incredibly arrogant over the years. You're speaking to your commander, Anatomy, and I'm commanding you to get the hell out of my office!"

"No. I'm not leaving until you hear what I have to say. I was one of the people who were attacked, and it was all based on one giant misunderstanding. That man shouldn't be punished for reacting the way he did. I've just recently been informed as to what he is. He was responding in an instinctual way. He wasn't in control."

"That's exactly the point. He wasn't able to control himself, and *that's* what's unacceptable!"

"Are the zombie soldiers Alpha Team took down responsible for their actions?" he questioned. "They have no control over their bodies. If they were alive, would you imprison them? Or, better yet, would you turn them over to any of the governments they might've offended so they can be tried for their crimes?"

Hush frowned.

"You wouldn't. *ROOT* wouldn't. We'd instead try to help them. Just like those soldiers, Fang wasn't at the metaphorical steering wheel when this entire commotion happened. So why aren't we *helping* him instead of trying to throw him away? How many years has he dedicated to this organization?"

"Alright, I'll take the bait. How would you suggest we *help* him?" he sarcastically asked.

"I'm sure the world's wolf demons have struggled with this very same behavior. They might have a way of dealing with this. That's the first place I'd start. And if that search yields no results, I'd look into finding a treatment medically," he retorted smugly.

Hush appeared to turn this declaration over in his head. "Why do you care so much what happens to him?"

"Because I joined this group so I could heal people, help them. Fang needs help. I can't just turn a blind eye to a person in need."

Amari stared at Anatomy in complete awe.

Hush thought about the department head's speech for a moment before swinging his head over to address Amari and Inspect. "It seems Wraith will owe Anatomy an enormous debt today," he grumbled. "Effective immediately, Fang is suspended from active Alpha Team missions, he will instead play a supporting role to the group from his *desk*. The timeframe of his suspension is entirely dependent on Anatomy, here. If, and when, he's able to 'fix' him and provide me with full medical clearance, Fang can have his active member status reinstated."

"Understood," all three agents said in unison.

"Good. Now get the hell out of my office," Hush barked, concluding the meeting.

## Chapter 11

As the door slammed behind the three agents, Inspect took off in a hot sprint to the elevator bank. She was very obviously going to check on Frisk.

Amari sighed. *This is all my fault. Everyone warned me, but I didn't listen.*

"Agent Wraith, are you alright?" Anatomy gently asked.

No. She felt utterly defeated. "I've been better."

"I wasn't lying in there. I will find a way to help him."

Turning, she took the man in a firm hug. "Thank you," she said, forcibly controlling the tears yearning to be shed. "If there's anything I can ever do for you, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Actually, there is something," he stammered, blushing as she released him. "Do you have any wolf demon connections I could possibly speak with?" He frowned. "I need your help because, after all my confident talk back there, I really haven't the slightest idea on where to start."

"Yes, I do. Let me make a call first. I want to see if an old friend would be willing to help us out." Roukan's fanged grin popped into her mind. "Once I speak with him, and if it's okay, I'll provide you with his information. I'll help you in any way I can."

"Thank you. Now, come and walk with me to the hospital. I want to take a real look at Frisk's face. The quicker I can get to him, the lower the probability he'll scar."

He took off in the direction of the elevator bank with Amari quickly falling in step behind him.

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Apparently, Frisk was released and no longer in the hospital when Anatomy and Amari got there. Launching her tracking powers, she found him outside, playing with Renji's two wolf pups, with a worried Inspect at his side.

She quickly ran over to him. "Frisk! We've been looking all over for you! Please, let Anatomy take a look at your wounds, he can heal you."

Before he could completely turn around, she roughly wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug, a hug he happily returned.

"Are you saying you don't like my new look?" he teased as he focused his attention on the head of the Medical Research Department.

Anatomy looked over the chaos etched into his face. "This may take a few minutes."

"Take your time. I've nowhere else to be," he calmly said as the master healer's hands cupped his cheeks.

Once the treatment began, Amari's gaze landed on Inspect. The woman looked like hell, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her so physically distraught.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, interrupting her concentration on what Anatomy was doing to her lover's face.

She frowned. "You didn't do anything wrong, but I'm really fucking pissed at you anyway. Shouldn't you be off checking on your rabid dog?"

Fury flashed before she shook her head and let the woman's last comment go. Putting herself in her shoes, she fully understood where she was coming from. "I needed to check on Frisk first."

Inspect didn't respond.

"You're avoiding him," Frisk bit out. "He's sedated. He's fine. I just visited him."

The words did nothing to soothe her. Hoping for a distraction, she looked over at the two wolves wrestling with each other in the grass. *I should really take them back to the nature preserve.*

When she whistled, the animals looked up for a moment before going right back to their match.

*Easier said than done.*

Walking off, she tried to catch the two animals by their vests, but the wolves understood her actions as play and began yipping and running around. After several minutes without any luck, a loud barking sound came from Frisk's direction. The noise captured the wolves' attention and set them off to his side.

She watched, mystified, as both wolves sat at his feet, waiting for instruction.

"I'll take care of the puppies," he called over. "They like me better, anyway!"

"Really? You'll take them to the nature preserve?"

He tried to stay still during Anatomy's treatment. "I don't see why not. The pack knows me from past missions. All I have to do is follow these two to their den, and be on my merry way. Plus, I'd appreciate getting off base for a while. It's been a very long day."

"Ah. Thanks." As she turned to leave, her mind raced to come up with an excuse for something, anything, else to do at the moment.

*Roukan!*

Instead of re-entering the hospital, she took out her phone and wandered off into the grass.

Roukan picked up on the first ring. "Sister, Amari!"

"Hi!" She forced happiness into her tone. "Do you have a few minutes to speak with me? I'm afraid I'm in desperate need of your help."

Renji's former Beta paused as if caught off guard. "What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"I've been better. Look, I know this may seem like it's coming out of nowhere, and I apologize for the abruptness of it all, but how do mated wolf demons keep themselves from flying off the handle and attempting to kill everybody?"

The other line remained silent.

"Are you there?" she bit out after several strained seconds.

"Yes, I... Did something happen to Renji?" he nervously asked.

"We've been having a lot of problems dealing with his mating instincts over the past few months. It's now escalated, and today he almost killed two people, one of whom is his teammate."

The man's stunned silence prompted her to continue.

"He thought I betrayed him," she sputtered. "But I didn't. And, he flipped the fuck out. I couldn't get through to him at all. He went all-out-beast, and I wasn't able to stop him! How the hell do wolf demons control that shit?"

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*Renji has no experience being mated to another. Too bad the idiot never paid an ounce of attention to our tribe's teachings when they were readily available to him.* Roukan sighed. "For the most part, that kind of out-of-control behavior is kept in check by the

pheromones of the mate," he growled, remembering the wolf demon tribe's most sacred law about not bedding humans.

"How *the hell* am I supposed to do that?"

"*You* can't. When a pair is mated, they physically connect by scent. It's an instinctual exchange happening in unison the moment they accept one another. It's a natural balancing system. Don't get me wrong, mated wolf demons will always be instinctually aggressive and possessive over their partners. But, they don't get set off into a state of bloodlust unless directly challenged by a competing male or female, or unless their mate is in danger."

The line went silent as Amari obviously struggled to understand.

"Sister, you aren't able to physically mark him as your mate, and because of this, Renji will always be left raw and unbalanced. His body is subconsciously seeking a primal reassurance you can't give him, leaving him the burden of dealing with his overwhelming urges alone. In all honesty, I'm not even sure how he was able to mark you since you weren't able to return the act in the first place."

"Do you honestly mean to tell me that in your entire tribe's history, not one wolf demon has taken a human as a mate?" she asked, her voice quivering with panic.

"It is our most sacred law not to lay with humans. However, plenty of wolf demons have done it and still do. It's never really been a problem because none of us have ever been able to mate with humans, so it's never progressed past sex," he said, remembering all of his former Alpha's sexual exploits with humans in the past.

As Amari's silence stretched out on the other end of the phone, he found his heart breaking for her... and Renji.

A mated wolf demon was a most dangerous thing, and Renji wasn't just any wolf demon, he was an alpha elite, the one-time ruler of their entire country. It was a title he earned at the ripe old age of sixteen with nothing more than his own brute strength. And it was a position that was never physically stripped away from him, even with the unpopular decision to disband their packs so very long ago.

Unless bested in battle by another male of their kind, his inner wolf would retain his alpha status. As such, Roukan could just imagine the level of energy that his former leader was putting forth each day as he sought to control his unbalanced and dominating inner beast.

"I can look into this further for you. We have plenty of books detailing the history of our tribe, and I can also consult with our healers. Would that help?" he offered.

Her voice cracked as she spoke. "Yes, please do. This is very important. Our future in working together is going to depend on some sort of miracle at this point. Anything you can do to help make it happen would be eternally appreciated."

"I'll be back in touch then," he promised before becoming deep in thought. "How were you finally able to stop him?"

She hesitated, struggling to remember. "I reached into his soul. Somewhere along the line, a part of my spiritual essence mixed in with his. I called that energy forth, and he just... collapsed."

He scratched his head, her explanation didn't make any sense. "Right. In the meantime, until you hear back from me, make sure to keep animal tranquilizers on hand just in case something happens. Don't be afraid to overdo it," he warned. "I promise to get back to you with any information I'm able to dig up."

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*Looks like I'm all out of excuses.* Amari shoved her phone in her pocket and made her way back into the hospital.

The overhead lighting was bright, and overall, the building had a sense of cheerfulness to it, although it did nothing to improve her foul mood.

When she finally found Renji's room, she hesitated at the door. She had no idea what to say to him. She was furious, terrified, sad, and disappointed. But more so than anything else, she was overwhelmingly worried about him.

It was this worry that forced her to push forward and enter.

Walking into the darkened room and over to the lone bed at its center, she studied her sleeping mate. His eyes were closed, yet his expression was one of worry. Looking at the flow of his IV drip, she contemplated turning it down but was afraid to. As she was about to try speaking to him, he sniffed the air, and his eyes cracked open.

They both stared at each other, neither able to say anything.

Amari moved first, slowly wrapping her hand around his.



Renji squeezed her fingers but cast his eyes down and away from her face. "You should leave."

"I'm not going anywhere." She took a seat next to him on the bed. "I'm right where I need to be."

"You *need* to be with another human. Someone who can give you a normal life, a real future, some fucking peace." His eyes squeezed shut as if in pain.

"And *you need* to be with another wolf demon. Someone who can stay by your side long into the future, naturally balance your crazy fucking hormones, and give *you* a normal life."

"I'm being serious right now! This isn't a fucking joke!"

She stared at the ceiling and prayed for patience. "So am I."

"What are you saying then?" he demanded. "Are you finally leaving me?" He opened his eyes and turned his head in her direction.

"Not on your life. We'll work it out. We *have* to find a way to work it out."

"You really are an idiot. There is no way to work *this* out."

"You're right. Finding a solution would require two of us. I can't work anything out by myself. Are you really giving up on this? On, us?" she accused as his marking scent flooded the air.

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Renji's heart slammed in his chest. He wanted to make her leave him, wanted to force her far away to keep her safe, but he selfishly couldn't speak the words.

He felt as Amari separated her hand from his, using it to pull his face back in her direction. He allowed her to tilt his head but refused to meet her eyes.

"Renji, I love you," she whispered.

The words broke his heart. "You shouldn't."

"But I do, and I know you love me, too." She placed a light kiss on his cheek. "I really wish I were a wolf demon, though," she confided as her head dropped to his shoulder. "I'd get to have sharp claws and teeth, and I'd get to run around in a cute little fur outfit and pretend to have a tail so all my friends would think I was cool," she joked. "And I'd have this wealth of pheromones at my disposal

to balance out my mate's needs and claim his as mine..." she drifted off, her tone becoming sad.

When he didn't respond, she said, "Can you please talk to me? I really *need* you to talk to me, baby, please. Don't shut me out."

"I don't know what to say."

"Tell me you love me. I'd love to hear those words right now." She reached up and gently stroked his hair. "I'd also love to hear you say you'd never give up on us."

"If it's to keep you safe, Amari..." Not being able to complete his sentence, he tried again. "If giving up on you would keep you safe... from me... then I'd do it," he croaked, the words paining him.

"That's the exact opposite of what we need right now!" She lifted her head from his shoulder and tried to look at his face.

He kept his stare trained on the mattress, avoiding her eyes.

"Stop being such a damn coward and look at me!" she roughly demanded.

He slowly lifted his eyes up to hers.

"You don't get to do this. After all the trouble you caused, you don't get to fucking push *me* away!" she hissed. "I'm afraid I have no interest in attending your little pity party, Renji. I'm here, by your side, supporting *my mate* after he almost accidentally killed two fucking people. I've had my ass handed to me today and lost the confidence of three of my most treasured colleagues, yet here I am, trying to lift you, my most precious person, back up onto his feet! And what're *you* doing in response? You're trying to run away with your tail between your legs."

She suddenly got to her feet and bolted for the door, but stilled when her hand gripped the knob.

"A mated male will not abandon his female. Even if he knows he will die. He won't leave even if you command it. He will fight to protect his woman, instinctually, until his very last breath."

Renji blinked several times. Amari was reciting the lecture his former mate, Emica, once gave her about mated wolf demons when she saved him in Japan.

She paused after the recital and turned to face him. "From the sound of what a mated male is supposed to be, you're really missing the mark. Maybe you were never truly mated to me in the first place." She then turned back around and exited the room.

*She's right. I'm a fucking coward.*

Amari was fighting his war, cleaning up his mess, and he emotionally abandoned her, something he promised her he would never do.

*I don't deserve her. The only thing I seem to be capable of doing is burdening her.* He truly felt lost. *She deserves to be with a man who can take care of her and give her a real life,* he dejectedly thought, as he rose from the bed and removed his IV.

As usual, mind and body never quite seemed to be on the same page. His body was instinctually driven to go after her, and whether his brain liked it or not, it was going to do just that.

Huffing, he stood and quickly exited the room. Picking up on her scent, he followed it over to their shared apartment. Upon entering their home, he noticed she didn't bother turning any lights on. He slowly followed her scent through the hallway and stopped at their bedroom door.

The odor of fresh tears wafted out from the room, the scent burning through his heart. Opening the door, his eyes quickly took in her shadowed form. She was rolled up into a little ball on their bed, and her face was buried in her pillow. She made no sound, but he could see her chest heaving from time-to-time.

*I did this to her.*

Luckily, before his mouth could pick back up on its earlier efforts to say something idiotic, his body reacted to the scene first, coming forward and pulling her tightly into his arms.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Her arms slowly snaked around his neck.

"I *do* love you, Amari. No matter what happens, promise me you'll never forget that," he choked out. "I'm so scared of losing you, and I'm so scared of staying with you. The only thing I truly know is I love you, and I always will."

"This is all *my* fault," she whispered. "This problem is because of me. I'm not enough for you. I can't give you what you need."

"Are you crazy? You're more than enough for me, more than I even deserve. I'm the one who can't seem to get out of my own way. You say you'll stand by my side, but eventually, you're going to throw in the towel. No one could possibly deal with all of my issues for very long," he confided.

"I'll throw in the towel when I'm dead."

"If you don't, you'll probably end up dead because of me," he spat.

"You're not going to hurt me. I truly believe that."

"I used to, too. But, I can't even fucking remember..." he sputtered. "I have no recollection at all of what happened today! Not a clue! The last thing I remember was the guy from the lobby leaning in to kiss you and you..."

Rage burned through his veins at the memory.

"We *weren't* going to kiss! That was Anatomy, and he happens to have a special gift for healing. He was trying to fix my shit show of a face when you walked in and obviously got the wrong idea."

"*Anatomy?*" he growled. "The guy from the bar that Terrain was into? The one Inspect said was interested in *you?*"

## Chapter 12

Amari wondered if now was an appropriate time to tell Renji about his inactive status on their team.

"Yes, that very one. The one who also pleaded your case to Hush today and managed to keep you with our squad."

Renji quieted, attempting to process this information.

"He might have been attracted to me a few weeks ago, but he's been dating Terrain. He seems to be very interested in her, and she in him. He wasn't trying to do anything today but help me. He's not your enemy."

He closed his eyes and drew in her scent.

It was an action she picked up on, and she could feel his heartbeat begin to slow in his chest. "Does smelling me calm you down?"

He placed a kiss atop her head. "A little."

"I spoke to Roukan today, and he was able to figure out why it's been so hard for you to control yourself." She hoped she didn't fall into tears while explaining it to him.

"You called, *Roukan*?" he said, shocked. "How embarrassing!"

"You're embarrassed because I called a mutual friend for help?"

"No, I'm embarrassed you'd call a *wolf demon* I know for help about our private business!" he seethed.

"Anyway!" she interrupted, plowing right on ahead. "The reason why you're having such a hard time fighting your instincts is because I haven't been able to mark you. Apparently, you require my marking scent to neutralize your raw impulses, and since I don't have one, you've been left... unchecked," she said, forcing out the words.

"That's a load of bullshit."

*You're such a pain in the ass!* Taking a deep breath, she pulled away from him, looking into his eyes. "It's *not* bullshit. It makes a lot of sense. Embrace it so we can collectively think of a way to work around it, instead of instantly rejecting everything you don't like hearing!"

"How in the world would we work around something like that?"

"I'm not sure. Roukan said he'd look into it, and Anatomy offered his help as well. Maybe there's something he can do as a

scientist. Otherwise, we're going to be shit outta luck in terms of ever working together again."

His eyes became grave. "What happened? I want to know about every damn thing that happened today after I walked into your office."

Taking a steadying breath, she recounted the entire story for him, up until the point she reached the hospital.

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Renji's posture slumped as he tried to process all of the day's events. He almost killed two people, one of which he actually came to consider a friend in the most recent weeks. He didn't even so much care about being forced into desk duty.

"This is such a mess." He rubbed his face, feeling incredibly guilty about everything. "How is Frisk? Did you talk to him?"

Remembering the state of Frisk's face and their earlier conversation in his hospital room now made him sick.

"Yes, he seemed okay. Luckily, Anatomy was able to heal all his injuries. When I last saw him, he was being sarcastic as usual and was going to do me the favor of dropping off the cubs."

"You let *Frisk* drop off the pups?" he asked, horrified. "There's no way they'll listen to him. Those are wild animals he's dealing with!"

"It's fine. They listened to him, I saw it with my own eyes. He was even playing with them outside."

He couldn't believe it.

"Look, if you see Anatomy again, are you going to lose your shit?"

"I'm not sure."

She tried again. "If I went over to talk to him tomorrow, are you going to lose your shit?"

"I think I'll be alright as long as I don't see him, but I'm not sure. I don't even know which way is up anymore, I really don't," he miserably said.

Amari once again wrapped her arms around him in a supportive hug. "We'll work through it," she swore. "We'll figure this out. I told you, I'm not giving up on you. I'd never give up on you."

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Amari felt Renji sink into her body with noticeable relief at her words. Bringing his lips down, he took her mouth in a soft and tender kiss.

"I need you right now," he confided. "I feel as though I'm going to break."

She took a moment to admire his natural comfort in his vulnerability. He remained confident even when wholly unguarded. He never struggled with his feelings, and for that, she envied him.

Dropping her head away from his, she placed a loving kiss over his heart before she slowly pushed him to their bed. Once there, she reached up and cupped his face.

"Just feel *me*, then. Embrace everything that is me and draw strength from it. I have enough for both of us." She smiled, desperate to reassure him. "Don't think, baby, just let me love you." She pulled his lips back down on hers.

Her words were met with a low rumble from deep within his throat, and his hands began to slowly roam over her body.

She made quick work of undressing each of them before guiding him down onto their bed. Usually, always in a hurry, she instead purposefully took her time and set a slow pace as she leaned over him.

Starting at his neck, she worked her way down his chest, dragging her tongue over the soft flesh covering the hardened muscles that flexed beneath. Savoring the taste of his skin, she licked, bit, and sucked her way over his body while her hands ghosted over his arms. She gently traced her fingertips over the ridges and caverns his defined biceps and triceps left in their wake.

Amari watched Renji's eyes flutter closed as he surrendered to the warmth and wetness of her mouth as it rolled over him. She was sure the scent of her arousal was in the air, and his body was responding to it, his hips slowly lifting, seeking to satiate her body's silent demands.

When she finally made her way down to his waist, she lowered her weight on him, catching his thick erection between her breasts.

She squeezed the soft mounds around him as she slowly began to grind against him.

Renji propped up on his elbows to watch her. "You drive me crazy," he rumbled as he desperately thrust against her.

Peering up at him, she seductively held his stare and made a show of slowly opening her mouth and running the underside of her tongue across the tip of his arousal during one of his upward thrusts.

"Mmm, baby, don't stop..." His mouth slightly opened to feed his increasing need for air.

Tracing her lips over the head of his erection, she dipped down and slid him down her throat. She hummed against him as she sucked, stroking her tongue against the soft underside of his member. After several pulls, she released him with a loud pop, before she lowered further, kneeling between his legs.

Amari snaked her arms under his thick thighs, and entwined her hands around his waist, locking him in place. She then used her shoulders to spread him further apart.

His manhood twitched involuntarily, seeking to recapture her attention.

*I'll get to you in a minute, big guy.*

Dipping her head, she hungrily ran her tongue over the soft junction between his thighs and groin, and he squirmed in her hold.

Taking this as a further invitation into the sensitive area, she buried her face and lightly sucked on his smooth, hairless skin.

Dropping off his elbows and onto his back, he lowly moaned as his newly clawed hands wrapped in her hair. He arched off the mattress, and his hips thrust against her while his marking scent flooded the room.

*That's what his body is craving from me, something I can't return.* She tried to ignore the rich, powerful concentration of it as she lovingly placed kisses over his entire groin. His hitched breathing and low groans were pushing her along, encouraging her to do more.

When she had her fill, she lightly rolled her face against the thick length of him, slowly sliding his erection across her cheek, before catching it with her mouth and twisting her tongue around the sensitive, weeping tip.



Renji guided her, pushing her down until she'd taken him to the hilt.

Finally unlinking her hands, she repositioned them on his hips, using the bones for support. She then pushed him down into the mattress, allowing the springs to push him back up again as she pumped him into her mouth.

When he began to groan, and his muscles strained and tightened around her, she freed him from her mouth. Sliding her tongue down the underside of his shaft, she completed the motion by nuzzling her face into his sack. Tracing her tongue over the thin and sensitive skin, she pulled one of his balls up into her mouth.

She could hear Renji's breath catch.

"Oh, my... *God. Amari...*"

She suckled him gently, running her tongue over the testicle before repeating the action with the other. Only a moment passed before the two heavy organs began to pull up and away from her.

*He's about to come.* Quickly guiding his shaft between her lips, she sucked hard and loudly groaned.

The vibrations had Renji's eyes rolling back in pleasure as he began to slam into her mouth.

She watched as his body tremored and twisted as he came. His warm orgasm exploded down her throat, and she struggled to swallow the generous amount of it. With each pull of her mouth, each swallow, he came yet again. He drowned her in the delicious taste of his seed, over and over until finally surrendering to sheer exhaustion.

Sensing his body finally relax, she gently withdrew and crawled over his torso, placing warm and loving kisses against his flesh each step of the way. Hovering over his chest, she met his glowing, red eyes and gently pushed a few loose strands of hair away from his face.

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Renji adoringly memorized his mate's beautiful face, silently worshipping her. He held her sparkling blue eyes for a moment before appreciatively sweeping his gaze down her naked body.

Without warning, he rolled her underneath him. Flipping her onto her stomach and spreading her legs, he pulled her hips back, so she was on all fours.

Leaning his weight against her back, he dropped his face in the crook of her neck. He lazily tasted her skin while his hands affectionately massaged and caressed her soft breasts.

As she began to groan, he ghosted his fangs across her jugular before dropping down and tracing it with his tongue.

When Amari rocked her hips, urgently seeking the feel of his, he licked his way down her spine. It was only when he reached her ass that he sat back and admired her spread form.

Kneeling, he positioned his heavy arousal between her thighs, realizing they were coated with desire for him. The knowledge had him loudly growling in approval. And when he felt the warm, seductive heat of her core, he slowly pumped between her slickened legs, rubbing the length of his shaft against her aching bud.

Amari trembled against him and moaned. Her breath was coming out in short and ragged bursts.

*That's right, baby. I want you burning for me. Beg me.*

Using his knees, he squeezed her thighs tightly around his arousal, and he firmly grabbed hold of her hips. He began to slowly thrust against her as he once again leaned over her.

She turned her head to meet him, and he captured her mouth with his in a soft, loving kiss. He teased her, twisting his tongue against hers in rhythm with his leisurely pumps.

"God, Renji, please..." She groaned as she struggled to hold herself up.

He wasn't sure when she did it. But at some point, she braced their shared weight onto her left hand, while reaching between her legs with her right. She tilted her palm and, after timing his thrusts, forced it down against her core, near her entrance. The act diverted the course of his manhood, adeptly guiding him inside of her.

Both shuddered at the penetration.

Abruptly breaking their kiss, he leaned back onto his knees, his hands once again coming to firmly grip her hips as he began to pump into her.

Trembling, she struggled to match his thrusts, a problem he easily corrected by pulling her back against his chest, forcing her to lean on him.

Her arms snaked up around his neck, and his left arm wrapped tightly around her stomach, anchoring her to him as his right hand coasted over her breasts, squeezing the round mounds and dragging his fingertips over her tightened nipples.

As she rested her head on his shoulder, he once again lowered his mouth to hers, running his tongue softly over her lips. Her heavy breathing ghosted against his mouth, tickling him.

"I can't get enough of you," he whispered as he began to quicken the pace of his thrusts.

She quivered in his arms. He could feel the heat and invisible electricity of her powers washing over him.

"Renji..." she cried out as her arms tightened around his neck. "Baby, you feel so good. I..."

"You, what?" He dipped his head and once again sucked on her neck.

"I love you," she whispered. "I am yours," she hummed out devotedly.

The words, as usual, burned right through his heart and sent shockwaves of pure possessiveness and protectiveness through his veins. When combined with the feel of her hot, tight sex clamping down on his, it sent him fiercely over the edge. His hips then took over, wildly slamming into her.

Amari was soon to follow, shuddering violently against him as she came. One of her arms uncoiled from his neck and grabbed hold of his hair. She roughly pulled on it while she arched against him and rode out the suffocating pulses of her orgasm.

When she started to come down from the high, Renji's palm flew down to her most precious place, applying firm pressure to the engorged bud as he continued to madly thrust into her.

This set off another explosion inside of her, and he obediently followed, losing himself in the shared ecstasy.

After several heartbeats, he rolled them over to their sides. When his breathing finally calmed, he propped up on his arm and pulled her tightly to him. Sensing the chill in the air, he grabbed their

heavy goose-down comforter that had fallen to the floor during their lovemaking and pulled it over them.

For a split second, he almost felt guilty about preprogramming their apartment's AI system to drop the temperature of the bedroom when it sensed their joint presence in it. But when she cuddled into him, it validated his reasons for doing it in the first place.

Amari usually worked late, and it left him with an abundance of free time to tinker with things.

When he was about to run his fingers through her hair, he oddly began to glow.

Closing his eyes, he fully embraced the feeling as he allowed the calming warmth of Amari's essence to slowly fill him. It gently stroked his inner beast, quickly turning the ferocious wolf into a malleable and playful puppy, while oddly reassuring him in some simple way as it bound itself to his very existence.

When he once again opened his eyes, he looked down at her, studying her face.

Her expression was soft and relaxed, and her eyes were barely open. Her pupils were unfocused, and she was staring out in the direction of the wall. Her breathing was still rapid but slowly relaxing. It looked as though she were about to fall asleep.

There were multiple times in the months since finding her again where he could feel or see her powers. Usually, when they were intimate, he would sense her spirit ghosting over and through him. But as for the glowing, it was something that only happened when Amari used her tracking abilities to connect with him; her powers would wrap around him and flood him with, what felt to be, her very soul.

He didn't understand it, but it was an indescribable loving connection he knew she shared with him... and only with him.

Now, as he surrendered to the glow, he wished she'd do it more often as he leaned over and kissed her temple.

"Feeling a little better?" she mumbled as she closed her eyes.

He nuzzled into her neck. "Much, much better. I feel completely grounded. Thank you."

She chuckled. "You don't have to thank me for sex."

"I'm not thanking you for the sex. Although, maybe I should. It was incredible, as always," he murmured into her hair.

She snuggled against him. "Well, then, I guess I'd have to thank you as well."

Several minutes passed, and before she drifted off to sleep, he spoke again.

"Amari?"

"Mmm."

"You do realize I'm still glowing, don't you?"

Opening her eyes, she turned in his arms to face him. "Sorry."

"No. Don't be. I really do... love it when you do this," he sincerely said, hoping she'd pick up on his hint.

"What does it feel like?"

"I usually feel your powers rush over me when we... make love. But this... this is different..." he trailed off, purring. "It's you, Amari. It's the feel of your soul inside my body... touching me."

"You can feel my powers?" she said, dumbfounded. "Since when? This is my first time hearing about this."

"It happened the first time we had sex," he quickly answered. "There was no glow back then, but I physically felt your heat and electricity washing over and into me," he remembered. "After that, I was able to sense your powers."

"My powers did upgrade after I lost you back in Japan. Since then, I've been able to sense your spirit with distance no longer posing a problem," she said as she processed this. "Why haven't you ever said anything before?"

"They're *your* powers. I thought you knew," he mumbled.

She abruptly cut the connection, ending the glow.

He childishly scowled at her. "Hey! I just told you I like that!"

"I just want to see something." She seemed to focus on his essence, and he once again lit up beside her.

He felt the tension that was always wound into his muscles immediately dissipate, and he relaxed.

"The spiritual connection soothes you, doesn't it?"

"It does. I really, really enjoy this, baby."

Amari dramatically rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay. I get it. Now that I know about it, I promise I'll do it more often."

## Chapter 13

It was three o'clock in the morning when Amari's phone rang, and she begrudgingly reached over her nightstand to answer the offending item.

"Agent Wraith," she mumbled, trying to shake the sleep from her voice.

She quietly listened to Inspect's commanding voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll suit up and be right there. I'm alerting the team now, and we'll set off in thirty minutes." Launching out of bed, she hurried to her walk-in closet, rushing to get dressed into her tactical clothing.

"Hey, Siri! Conference call Alpha Team using speakerphone." She struggled to slide into her sports bra and vest at the same time.

One-by-one, the Alpha Team members answered the call. All sounded half asleep.

"We have a mission. Meet me on the airstrip in thirty minutes."

"Understood," croaked the tired voices in unison as they all hung up the line.

"What's going on?" Renji grumbled as he got out of bed and watched her scramble to dress.

"There's a massive attack in progress in Shanghai, China," she hurriedly said. "It appears the cybertronic soldiers are at it again. However, this time, there's a small army of them, and they're forcing their way into the Tsuki Industries' industrial plant located there."

She pulled her bow and several arrows from the closet.

"Multiple hostages are involved. The Chinese military is trying to stop them but is suffering significant casualties and can't push their way through without risking the lives of the hostages or their civilians. Our *ROOT* base is the closest, so our people are being sent in. All the departments are sending in ground teams with combat capabilities. Alpha Team is being sent to the front lines, and has permission to use all other available teams as support."

Taking a deep breath, she braced herself for the argument sure to ensue. She patiently waited for Renji to, predictably, demand to go with her.

She imagined, if left to his own stubborn devices, he would somehow find a way to sneak aboard their plane and force his way into the mission regardless. She truly wouldn't put it past him.

Instead, a few moments ticked by in silence, the only sounds being the metallic noises her Glock's made as she placed them into their holsters.

She chanced a glance over in his direction.

"Please be careful." There was no mistaking the protectiveness in his voice as he looked her over. "Those soldiers are no joke. No matter what happens, make sure you're able to come back home to me," he ordered before dropping his voice. "And please... apologize to everyone for me."

After she finished wrapping her bow around her back, she paused to study him. "That's it?"

"That's what?"

"Nothing," she softly said, becoming worried. "Baby, are you feeling okay?"

"I feel fine. Why? Is something wrong?"

"No. It's just... This is really unlike you, that's all."

"I just want you to be safe. I know you can handle it. I wish I could go, but I very obviously have to guard my desk against the forces of evil for the rest of eternity," he sarcastically said while crossing his arms over his chest.

She rushed over to him, her palm roughly landing against his forehead as she checked him for signs of a fever.

"What's wrong with you?"

Dropping her hand, she stared at him for a moment before wrapping him in a tight hug. "Thank you."

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Amari stood on the runway as she waited for the arrival of her active Alpha Team members. She spent the time working with the armory and the other agency team leaders, stocking up on high voltage stun rods and armor-piercing bullets. She also added grenades and various other explosives to their shared team inventory.

After what they experienced the last time, she was going in prepared.

She and the other team leads exchanged notes on the various strengths, weaknesses, and abilities each of the participating agents could contribute to the mission. Working together, they formulated a plan of attack that would allow them to get in, save the hostages, and take down the guards.

Sadly, because of the danger the Ultimate Soldiers posed, the directive was to kill on sight. For a moment, she felt incredibly guilty about this, knowing that these soldiers were innocent and not in control of their actions; however, the lives of her people meant more to her.

It was a necessary decision to make, yet the immorality of it deeply grated her.

As the team leads dispersed, the large Airbus A400M Atlas plane rolled down the runway. The four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft would be taking a total of thirty-one *ROOT* agents and sky dropping them into the perimeter of the Tsuki Industries' manufacturing plant.

Outside of Wraith's current Alpha Team count of six, she'd have twelve additional Reconnaissance agents comprised of the Beta and Omega teams. There'd be six agents from the Intelligence Department, four medics from the Medical Research Department, and three agents from the Interrogation Department. Five sleeper agents located in Shanghai would be coming in to represent the Assassination Department.

The sudden image of Renji's fanged grin burst into her consciousness.

*He really would've loved this.*

Her team's approach from the far side of the runway interrupted her thoughts. They all walked together and with purpose, flanked by four adult wolves. All had their heads raised proudly in the air and looked entirely bad-ass as they made their grand entrance.

The other agents gathering on the runway hurriedly shuffled out of their way, looking upon them in awe.

*That's my team,* she proudly thought, trying her best not to focus on the one missing member. She instead attempted to figure out why the hell four of Renji's wolves were there.

As the group approached, she nodded to them approvingly before dropping her gaze down to the animals.



For some reason, she caught the odd smell of bacon wafting through the air.

"Why are *they* here?" She pointed to the wolves. "We can't control them."

"I can," Frisk smugly said. "They'll listen to me. Promise."

She studied him for a moment before realization slowly dawned on her. *Oh, no.* "What the hell did you do?" she hissed in a rushed whisper, having a feeling she already knew the answer.

When he didn't immediately speak, she tried to remain calm, but it wasn't working.

"I learned how to communicate with them," he quickly said, diverting his eyes.

"Fang willingly shared that knowledge with you?" she accusingly asked. *There's no way in hell he'd do that!*

"No, I copied the knowledge of the language while he was... predisposed," he guiltily admitted.

"Frisk! How *could* you? "

"I didn't mean to absorb it, I really didn't. I just wanted to check on something, and well... it just sorta happened."

"What the hell were you checking for?"

"I wanted to believe him, Rai. I really did. But, the only way I could was if I were able to see for myself..." He touched his face. "I needed to see what the hell was going on with him. I needed to check his memories, absorb his experiences, to be sure he really wasn't aware of what he did... to me."

*Oh, Frisk.*

"His story checked out, by the way. He really has no memory of the attack." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a strip of bacon, gently offering it to the alpha wolf.

Kiba greedily snatched the food from his hand.

"Frisk!" She punched him hard in the arm. "You can't give them that! They're wild animals, not dogs! Fang really will kill you this time around if he finds out!"

"Then, don't tell him." He walked off to the transport aircraft, the four wolves followed closely behind, wagging their tails.

She watched him go, utterly horrified.

"Um, Wraith?"

Terrain's soft voice broke her concentration on Frisk's back, and she turned to face her.

"We all heard about what happened yesterday. Is Fang really off the team?"

Sighing, she motioned for the group to follow her to the plane. "He's still a member of the team but has inactive status. He'll remain that way until Anatomy can provide the General with some kind of medical clearance proving he's able to control himself."

The entire team was paying close attention.

"Fang wanted me to apologize to all of you on his behalf for his recent actions."

Terrain's eyes narrowed. "Lucky you were around. Anatomy told me what happened. Fang was going to kill him."

"Yes, he was. But, please keep in mind that he wasn't conscious during that... episode. It doesn't make it right, but I need you to know that it really wasn't him doing any of those things. He feels incredibly guilty."

Terrain said nothing further as the group approached Frisk's location by the plane's stairs.

As the group gathered around her, Amari turned to address them, fully updating them on the situation they were about to enter in China.

"On the plane, I will be collectively briefing everyone on our strategy going in. But I just wanted to speak to you all first, before we put our lives on the line," she said in her most commanding voice.

Frisk perked right up. "Inspirational speech time!"

"Alpha Team, our mission today is to retrieve fifteen innocent hostages, possibly more. Our secondary goal is to keep those hostages safe and alive while we enter warlike conditions. That being said, know that our *primary* goal is to keep one another alive and safe. We're not going in there to make any sacrifices. Watch each other's backs and, as always, move as one. Never stop communicating with each other. If we stop talking, we die!" she hollered as she saluted the group.

The group's hands flew up, saluting in return before erupting into hoots and hollers, gaining the attention of the balance of the agents on the runway.

In unison, Alpha team turned, adrenaline pumping through their veins as they hurried up the stairway leading to the plane.

## Chapter 14

The Airbus A400m Atlas silently circled the sky around Tsuki Industries' Chinese manufacturing factory, its infrared cameras providing its occupants with the heat signatures of the many bodies down below.

In observing the heat signatures in relation to the landscape, it was easy to surmise all bodies located outside the factory's perimeter belonged to the Chinese military. All others scattered within were either hostages or enemy soldiers.

The general plan was to evacuate the hostages before working to take down the hostile soldiers. The total count of heat signatures inside the manufacturing factory's perimeter was thirty-six, and there was no way of telling how many of the hostages accounted for this number.

Based on the Intelligence Department's information, the cameras stationed around the factory recorded fifteen men and women being dragged into the private grounds by soldiers. The count of the soldiers, who all looked like steroid infused bodybuilders due to their large and hulking appearances, was thirty.

Unfortunately, this initial information was all that was available as the enemy cut power to the plant upon arrival.

So, all in all, there were a total of forty-five bodies scattered about, and *ROOT* had the difficult task of trying to figure out who was friend and who was foe while out on the field.

Amari briefed all of her plane's occupants on the soldier's abilities along with their weaknesses, courtesy of Anatomy's recent findings.

Prior to take-off, she worked with the other team leaders to identify the agents with the most impactful and offensive front line abilities. These included nature types, elemental types, combat types, and energy types. All others who didn't fall into these four categories were classified as having support abilities. These included stealth types, search and tracking types, psychic types, and supernatural mage types. If an agent fell into both categories, as Amari did, they were deferred into an offensive line position.

All agents were given earpiece radios, night vision eyewear, and the standard *ROOT* heavy combat tactical gear, which was made up

of fire-resistant clothing and Teflon armor. Additionally, they were given high voltage stun rods and grenades. Any other weaponry was made up of the individual agent's choosing.

Alpha Team wore yellow bands around their left biceps to provide all other agents with a visual cue as to who they were out on the field. Even the wolves' Teflon vests were marked with reflective yellow tape.

For similar identification purposes, the medically trained agents wore white armbands, and all other agents either wore red bands signifying an offensive role or blue bands signifying a supportive role.

The directive on the field was based on a simple buddy system strategy. Offensive agents would quietly surround the perimeter while their assigned support agents would search the area to identify and rescue the hostages. If the support agents encountered trouble, their assigned offensive agent counterpart would charge in and handle the fighting.

Each set of agents would remain in contact with their teammate using their very own radiofrequency. There was one frequency reserved for shared communications with the entire group.

Alpha Team had its own objective on this mission. They were to find a way inside the factory and dispatch all hostile forces within while keeping the hostages safe. The outside groups would then make their way inside for support. According to the math, there should be a total of nine people waiting for them inside. If this number was wholly made up of Ultimate Soldiers, Alpha Team was genuinely going to have their hands full before any backup arrived.

"Almost time to fly," came the pilot's notification to the passengers, prompting the agents to strap into their parachute gear.

"Alright, everyone, before we all become airborne, remember that the key to completing this mission is communication. I can't stress enough how important it is to alert your teammates to your locations, your findings, and to any problems you encounter down there.

"You will all be working in small teams, but each of you makes up a considerable force, meaning that this is no time to try to be an independent hero. If one person goes off on their own, there *will* be casualties suffered collectively," Amari warned.

"Keep in mind we were all selected because we are the best *ROOT* has to offer for this particular problem. When you're down there, I want you to remember our enemy is sensitive to electricity. If you're going to zap them, make sure the voltage on your stun rods is turned all the way up. If you do strike them with the rods, you have to hold the charge for a long time to ensure you fry their circuitry.

"Additionally, these soldiers can be blown up. However, proceed with *extreme* caution in doing so. If you aren't on the established perimeter, then you don't have clearance to use explosives; too far within the perimeter and the explosion can, and most likely will, react with the materials and chemicals inside the factory. Also, you're very likely to take out some of your comrade agents accidentally. So again, I command you to use *extreme* caution in your judgment with using explosives.

"Finally, these soldiers can be weakened by the removal of their limbs and heads. It will not stop them from moving, but it will prevent them from successfully attacking you," she authoritatively said.

"The Intelligence Department provided the Chinese government with false information a few hours ago. Because of this, the Chinese military is under the impression allied North Korean troops are coming in to assist them. They will believe we are these troops and won't attack us.

"As you all know, we're a secret military operation and would like to keep it that way. So, if for some reason, you aren't able to make it back to the plane, you know how to get back in touch with the organization for assistance."

Amari finally paused as she looked over the faces in the large group. They were all beaming at her, and she could feel the adrenaline pumping in the air.

"If there are any questions, now is the time to ask."

After a few moments of silence, she wrapped up her briefing. "Alright agents, make sure you watch each other's backs down there. That's the most important service you can provide on this mission, and it is to each other. Now, go and kick some Ultimate Soldier ass!" she barked out as she saluted.

The group collectively saluted back to her, standing tall.

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The large aircraft intentionally cloaked its presence by circling the factory high in the sky as its doors began to open.

Two by two, the agents jumped out of the plane with their assigned teammate. Hidden by the darkness of the night, they launched their parachutes and glided over to their designated sections. When on the ground, the support agents immediately set off to identify and rescue any hostages as planned.

Alpha Team was the last to exit the plane, with the men in the group carrying the nervous wolves. Their largest member, Quake, took two.

They collectively floated to their assigned section, which was located on the outside perimeter of the factory, facing its rear entrance. The plane's infrared cameras confirmed this area had the least amount of heat signatures and should provide them with minimal resistance.

*This is all you, Trace. Tell me, how are we looking?* Amari mentally asked through Mystic's psychic connection the moment she hit the ground.

Trace dropped to his knees, his hands flying up to his temples as he closed his eyes. *There are a total of six people scattered ahead. Two groups of three.*

*Is there a clear path to the entrance?*

*Four of the six are moving around quite a bit on our right and left, while two are staying still. If we were to make a run for it, I can't tell whether we'll run into any of those who are moving,* he advised.

*Okay, Trace, we're going to burst forward. You need to lead us, and we'll flank you with Quake taking the rear.*

*Understood.*

*Frisk, have the wolves occupy the inside of our circle.*

*On it,* he replied, as he lowly growled, transferring the order to the wolves.

Alpha Team released their guns and flew around Trace in the ordered formation, with the wolves keeping to the inside of the protective circle. They then made their way to the back entrance in a crouched run.

Time wasn't on their side, however. The dawn was upon them, and the sky would slowly be brightening with the rising sun.

As the team carefully made their way forward, they heard the sounds of fighting slowly begin to kick up around the far-reaching grounds. Apparently, the six people scattered within Alpha Team's section seemed to pick up on the noises as well.

*We've got incoming on the right side. One body is making its way toward us,* Trace advised.

*Fire up the rods. If it's a soldier, using our guns to bring him down is going to kick up a fuss, and it may draw other hostiles.*

*Understood,* came the joint reply as all members readied their stun rods.

*Let's angle to the left and try to pick up the pace to avoid him,* Trace commanded as the team broke out into a real run, following his lead.

Amari's shield instinctively flew up over the group as several shots were fired in their direction.

*We've been made.* Angling her head to the right, she caught a glimpse of a giant soldier heatedly running to catch up to them. There was a machine gun poised in his right arm.

*So much for being quiet. Time for plan B.* Frisk swung his Glock in his direction and repeatedly fired, landing several bullets into the soldier's head.

The man went down before quickly attempting to get up again in the same exact fashion the group encountered back on Hashima Island.

*Another body is coming our way, this time from the left,* Trace said.

*If we stop to fight these soldiers here, who knows how many could surround us. But, if we run to the back entrance, we're most likely going to find it's locked, which would require time to find another way in; this situation could also lead to us to become cornered,* Amari thought.

*So what are your orders then?* Frisk asked as he and Mystic joined forces and let off several more rounds into the soldier from before.

She looked ahead, noticing the factory had several large windows surrounding its foundation.



*Let's charge forward and break through one of those windows instead of wasting our time with the door. I'll keep the shield over us for as long as I can while we do. Once inside, have the wolves set off to collect information from the shadows. There should be plenty of places for them to hide in there.*

Roger, came the collective reply.

*And if we encounter any more soldiers on our way, try to shoot at their eyes, hands, or feet. If you can destroy any of these body parts, they shouldn't be able to see, walk or fire their guns any longer, she thoughtfully said.*

*Their eyes, hands, or feet? Do you know how fucking hard that's going to be, Rai? These motherfuckers are moving, not taking a nap in front of a stationary sniper rifle. How the hell are we supposed to manage that?* Frisk huffed.

*I said, 'try.' I didn't say it'd be easy. The only other option we have is to engage them in close combat so we can stun them, and that's going to take some time. If multiple soldiers crowd us, we're done for. It's not like any of us can chop their limbs off, and we can't use explosives right now. We don't really have many choices or a whole lot of time here.*

*I never thought I'd say it, but I wish Fang Sr. were here. He'd be able to slash his way through some limbs for sure with those fucking talons of his,* Frisk muttered.

Several more shots fired at them, this time from their left. The soldier Trace was avoiding found them, the rising sun assisting in his efforts.

Quake raised his machine gun and began to fire at the soldier's feet. The man stumbled mid-run but quickly righted, prompting him to try again.

Swinging her Glock in the soldier's direction, Amari attempted to shoot out one of his eyes. As she and the soldier were both running, she missed, hitting his skull instead. The impact dropped the soldier to the floor, but he quickly righted himself.

*Guys, two more are coming our way, one on each side!* Trace shouted.

*We're almost there!* Amari yelled. *Quake, get ready! The minute we get to those windows, make sure they aren't able to follow us.*

*Got it!* he drawled, releasing his machine gun and shifting it over his back by the strap. *Make sure you guys cover me!*

*Will do, baby!* Mystic excitedly said. She obviously got a real kick out of watching her man in action.

As the windows finally came into view, Quake stopped running and turned away from the group. He wore a broad smile as he made two fists, rose them high above his head, and dropped to his knees, slamming them ferociously down against the floor.

The earth came to life in response, rumbling loudly and splitting. The vibrations of the resulting earthquake forced both the attackers and Alpha Team to fall flat against the ground to brace themselves.

Quickly rising to his feet, Quake clapped his hands together and closed his eyes. He took a breath before slowly separating his palms, spreading each of his arms out to his sides. His face became red, and his breathing ragged.

The motion forced the chasm to spread, following the direction of his fingers.

Once the rumbling finally stopped, a deep, wide crack circled the entire rear of the factory, keeping Alpha Team separated from the rest of the grounds. The incredible chasm looked to be over forty feet deep. If anyone fell into it, they wouldn't be able to climb back out again without some type of mechanical assistance.

The wolves, unfortunately, became slightly disorientated by all the commotion and began nervously whining.

*Frisk, make sure you manage their expectations at all times! You need to tell them what's going on, so they don't freak out!* Amari warned. *Right now, their behavior and their lives are your responsibility.*

*Sorry! I didn't even think about that!* He began to soothe the wolves.

The four soldiers chasing the group halted around the giant hole. Aiming their weapons, they began firing on them from all sides as Quake made his way back to the group.

*Hurry guys, this shield isn't wholly impenetrable!*

All members rushed to the closest window as Amari stood in front of them, willing her shield to hold as she protected them.

Once Terrain broke the window, Trace peered inside, hoping to divulge the location of any additional targets.

*It's pitch black in there. Luckily, I'm not sensing any people in this specific area.*

*That's great. Get the wolves inside,* Amari ordered.

*Understood.* Frisk began growling, alerting the wolves of their orders, as he and Trace carefully worked to get them through the window.

As soon as the wolves were in, the remainder of the team scrambled to get inside. Amari was the last to enter the factory.

*From what we can tell from the photos, there's only one giant floor, but Terrain, I want you to check to make sure,* she instructed.

*Got it.* Dropping to her knees, she placed her hands on the floor. She was only down for about a minute before she perked right back up again. *There are two sub-terrain levels beneath us.*

*That's really odd for a factory,* Amari said, becoming puzzled.

*That may be where the nine missing bodies are hiding,* Frisk thoughtfully said.

*Let's look for a way to get down there.*

Frisk started lowly barking, and the wolves quickly fanned out in search of a possible entrance.

The team walked together, as one unit, as they followed along the warehouse wall. Several minutes passed before one of the wolves signaled them by whining.

*Fang Jr. found it!* Frisk excitedly said.

Amari rolled her eyes. What started as a joke just to annoy Renji seemed to have stuck permanently. She didn't think Frisk would ever refer to Kiba as anything but Fang Jr. again.

As they made their way over to the gray alpha wolf, it stood on his hind legs and attempted to open the door to a stairway.

*Alright guys, ready your weapons. I'm going first. If there's trouble, my powers will kick up to protect us,* Amari advised.

*Roger.*

She took a deep breath as she descended down the stairwell. In the pitch-black darkness, her night-vision goggles were only helping so much. She pushed on carefully, willing her footsteps to softly ghost over the metallic steps, not wanting to make any noise. When

she finally approached the platform, signaling the first sublevel, she hesitated to open the door.

*Trace, do you sense anyone?* she asked, feeling him shuffle to fall in line behind her.

*There are three people in there,* he quickly said.

*How close are they to the door?*

*About one hundred feet.*

*Crap. I really don't like the idea of fighting a bunch of zombie soldiers in the dark.*

Although their night-vision goggles were helpful, they were disorientating and not meant for close-quarters combat.

She once again, wished Renji were with them. With his enhanced senses, he'd have no trouble fighting any enemies they encountered even in complete darkness. Also, with his ability to use electricity coupled with his incredible speed and sharp claws, he'd be the best choice to send in first.

*Trace, we're going to follow you. Try to get us as close as you can so we can get visual confirmation of who's in there without getting found out.*

*Understood.* He squeezed past her, taking the lead.

## Chapter 15

Trace quietly opened the door and took a left with the balance of the team following him in single file.

*Frisk, have the wolves circle the perimeter to cover us.*

*Yup,* Frisk responded as he quickly instructed the wolves.

*It appears all three are in the middle of this space. They aren't moving,* Trace said.

*Understood. Let's make our way over there. Try to be as slow-moving as possible. It's going to be easy to trip on something with all this junk down here.*

Amari took note of all the circuit boards loaded into crates and boxes throughout the space. Apparently, the level they were on was used for storage.

The team carefully wove between the large racks, pallets, and boxes as they quietly made their way to the center of the floor.

Suddenly, Trace stopped, causing all members to pile into one another.

*Hey! If you're going to stop moving up there, you need to tell us!* Frisk grumbled from the back of the line.

*I can see them,* Trace said, his voice barely a whisper.

*You don't need to whisper, dummy! No one can hear us!* Frisk shouted loudly into the group's minds.

Amari ignored the comment, flanking Trace while straining to see. She could make out the outlines of three people sitting on the floor.

*We've got to get closer.* She took several steps forward.

The closer proximity rewarded her with clearer images of three people: two males and one female sitting on the floor. Their posture was slumped. All three appeared to be staring at the ground in the darkness.

*I think these three are hostages.* She took a few steps closer until she was only a few feet away, feeling as the remainder of the team followed.

*Yeah, these guys definitely don't look like soldiers.* Quake studied the three silent forms ahead.

*Trace, are you sure these are the only three people on this floor?* Amari asked.

He stilled and scanned the area before answering, *Yes. These are the only three people here.*

She didn't know why, but something felt wrong. Her sensory powers seemed to agree as she felt a quick wave of electricity run up her spine. *Something doesn't feel right. Why would three hostages be dumped here unattended?*

*The soldiers might've left them here while they went off to either look for something or fight,* Quake provided.

*Maybe.*

*Let's try talking to them,* Mystic softly said. *If they're anything like Ellie, they've probably been tortured. We need to figure out if they'll come with us, or if we're going to need to carry them out.*

The team watched as the silver-haired psychic took a few steps, stopping in front of the male hostage positioned in the middle.

"My name is Mystic. My friends and I are here to rescue you. We will not harm you."

None of the hostages moved, nor did they raise their heads in response to her sudden voice.

Frisk sighed. *Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. We're probably going to have to drag them upstairs until our reinforcements arrive.*

Without any warning, the male hostage's hand shot out, roughly wrapping around Mystic's wrist.

The movement caused the entire team to draw their guns and aim their weapons at his head.

"Let her go!" Quake yelled, his deep voice echoing within the space.

The hostage's hand dropped and fell back to his side.

*Are you alright?* Amari worriedly asked.

Mystic didn't respond.

*Answer her!* Quake roared inside their heads.

*Quake, calm the fuck down. We don't need a repeat of last time,* Frisk warned.

*I'm fine,* she softly responded. *We should take these three with us as we make our way downstairs.*

*I'd rather leave these three people here before we check out what's going on downstairs,* Amari said.

*No, we need to take them with us and go straight downstairs.*

She studied her for a moment. *If there are soldiers down there, then we'd be adding three bodies to the number we'd be forced to protect in addition to each other.*

Mystic said nothing.

*Frisk, call over the wolves. We're going to exit this space and check out the bottom floor. I don't think these three will be going anywhere. They seem just as immobile as the hostage we rescued from Hashima Island,* she ordered.

He growled for a few seconds, before making his way back to the stairwell with the remainder of the team following behind him.

*Trace when we get to the stairwell, please lead the way again. Same routine,* Amari instructed.

*Got it!* He once again took the lead.

As Alpha Team made their way down the stairwell, they paused at the door.

*How many?*

*Six. And they're all moving and scattered about,* he advised, reaching to open the door.

But, before he could pull on the handle, a wave of warning flooded Amari's senses. She grabbed his arm, stopping him. *There's danger in there.*

She felt everyone stiffen behind her.

A few seconds ticked by in silence in the pitch darkness, before Quake's voice broke into their consciousness. *Mystic, where are you?*

The team paused, each scanning the faces of their little group in the dark.

*Is she still upstairs?* Terrain asked, confused.

*Mystic? We need you to respond to us. Where are you?* Amari hissed, losing her patience.

*I'm upstairs helping the hostages.*

*What?*

*We can't leave them here.*

*Leave those damn hostages alone and get down here now!*

*That's a damn order!*

Mystic didn't respond, nor did they sense her enter the stairwell.

*Quake, bring her downstairs, forcibly if necessary. Frisk, take the wolves and go with him.*

Both men turned and went back up the stairs.

Several minutes passed before they could mentally hear Quake and Frisk arguing with Mystic to drop the hostage she was trying to drag out of the room above. They were also privy to the small scuffle that ensued before both men returned.

Quake obviously forced her to go with him, as Mystic was now slung over his shoulder.

*What the hell is the matter with you? Amari grumbled as Quake lowered Mystic back onto her feet. Have you lost your damn mind?*

*You need to listen to me. We can't leave those people up there. Please trust me!*

She once again felt a small warning ghost over her as she studied Mystic's face. *Are you suggesting we rescue those hostages in the same way we saved Fang from the Tokyo police station six months ago?* she warily asked.

The remainder of the group frowned in confusion.

*Yes. The same way is fine. We can't just leave them there,* she softly said.

Frisk and Amari exchanged worried glances.

*We stole those three police helicopters back then and used them to escape Japan,* he said, chuckling. *That was a lot of fun. Don't you agree, Mystic?*

*Yes, it was. Now please, let's go back upstairs.*

*Of course, please lead the way,* Amari said with feigned happiness.

As Mystic turned, Frisk and Amari both jumped into action.

Frisk quickly restrained Quake and covered his mouth with his hand as Amari simultaneously brought the handle of her Glock down against the back of Mystic's skull.

The blow had the desired effect, and the low hum of their shared mental connection went silent along with Mystic's consciousness. Amari kindly ensured she caught the small woman in her arms before she fell over onto her face.

Terrain and Trace instantly ran over to assist Frisk in holding Quake down.

"Quake, I need you to stay calm. You know why I needed to do that," Amari whispered, praying the six unidentified people



occupying their current floor weren't able to hear them. "I couldn't have you interfere."

Quake's eyes were wide, and he was covered in sweat. He looked into Amari's face, meeting her eyes before he shakily nodded.

When Frisk finally let go of his mouth, she said, "Would you please carry her? Keep her safe?"

He once again nodded.

"All of these hostages might be like the one we encountered on that island," she whispered as she passed Mystic's body over. "No one should touch them. They should be treated as a threat."

"Then how the hell are we supposed to get them out of here? And what about all the agents outside trying to rescue them?" Terrain said in her lowest possible voice.

*Fuck!* Her hand flew to her earpiece, and she jumped onto the global *ROOT* frequency to address all agents.

"All agents, this is Alpha Team leader, Wraith. All hostages should be treated as hostile and are extremely dangerous. Don't speak to them, and don't, I repeat, don't make skin-to-skin contact with them. Proceed with absolute caution in handling them. It should be assumed they're able to control the minds of others. If anyone has handled them and is now acting suspicious, knock them unconscious. That's an order."

"This is just great. I wish we knew this before. I can only imagine how many agents have already touched them while trying to save them," Terrain worriedly said. "So now everyone outside isn't only fighting the soldiers, they're also going to be fighting with each other, and trying to capture hostages all at the same time."

"What a fucking mess." Trying to stifle her rising panic, her hand flew back to her earpiece. "Team leaders, what's the situation outside? How soon until Alpha Team can be provided with reinforcements?"

"The majority of soldiers have been incapacitated, our people are grouping together to take on what's left. We have no hostage casualties at this time. We can't spare many hands, but I'll send you, what seems to be, the two best offensive agents out here," Reconnaissance Beta Team leader, Cover, advised.

"Understood." She dropped her hand from her ear and contemplated their current situation. *Six people are moving around*

*on this floor. One, or all, of them, pose a definite threat to us. With Mystic down, there are only five of us left to fight plus four wolves.*

Turning, she addressed her group. "I want all of us back on the main floor until these two additional agents arrive."

"Amen to that," Trace softly said as the group collectively turned to go back up the stairwell.

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Alpha Team fanned out on the main floor of the factory, waiting for their support to arrive. As they wandered around, Amari took note of the equipment around her. The machines were large and took up the length of two football fields.

As she investigated further, she focused on the stamp size circuits lined up on the machine's tread. They matched the ones Anatomy pulled from the two soldiers they took down several weeks ago.

*So this is Tsuki Industries circuit production plant? Is that why the Ultimate Soldiers are attacking it?*

Boxes of circuits were stacked in neat piles near the factory's front entrance.

*Looks like they're trying to stock up on these parts, she concluded. I guess buying them was getting too expensive. She chuckled at the sheer volume gathered. How many soldiers are they hoping to create with this massive supply?*

"Two bodies are approaching the front entrance," Trace shouted, the advisement echoing through the giant structure.

"Show us the direction they're coming from. Everyone draw your weapons. Don't take any chances."

Alpha Team made their way over to the area where they'd heard Trace's voice to back him up. Soon, a knock rang out against the factory's metallic front entrance.

"Probably our support if they're gonna go out of their way to knock," Frisk grumbled.

He looked at Amari for permission to unlatch the large metal door. When she nodded, he set straight to work, lifting the lever holding the door in place. As the large sheet of metal swung open, two females wearing red armbands stepped forward.

One of the women had long, flowing blonde hair. She was wearing a ninja mask that covered most of her face with exception to her light, blue eyes, which were reminiscent of the ocean. She was tall, thin, and lean and covered in drying blood. From the holster on her back, two black katana handles protruded from each of her shoulders.

The second woman looked exactly like the first. Only she didn't wear a mask, and her hair was tightly braided down her back. She didn't wear the standard *ROOT* tactical clothing either. She wore a skin-tight, black rubber suit stitched in a zigzag fashion with copper-colored thread. She also wore matching copper-colored gloves over her hands.

"I am agent Wraith. Please tell me your codenames and abilities," she ordered as she looked the women over.

"We are sleeper agents from the Assassination Department sent in to assist you," the ninja looking woman answered. "My name is Deception, and I have the power of invisibility. I am exceptional at using my two katanas and can be of great assistance in reducing enemy soldiers to pieces."

"My name is Bolt," the second woman said. "I can generate large electrical currents and drive them into the bodies of enemy soldiers, fully incapacitating them."

Amari smiled. "You two are perfect! We thank you for your assistance!"

Both women bowed their heads in gratitude.

"We have three hostages one floor below us. One attempted to invade our teammate's mind. We needed to knock her unconscious as a result." She pointed over to Mystic, who was slumped over Quake's large shoulder. "We also have six unidentified people moving two floors below us. Upon approaching that particular floor, my sensory powers warned of great danger. As the body count on the floor outnumbered us, we called in for your assistance," Amari advised.

Frisk stared at the two women with an eerie sense of familiarity, openly gaping. "Twins," he sputtered. "Ah... you two are... the twins... I..."

*Seriously, Frisk? We're on a fucking mission right now! She shot him a dirty look. Are you trying to hit on them?*

Under any other circumstances, she probably wouldn't have blamed him. The two assassins were drop-dead gorgeous in a sex-kitten kind of way.

Both women exchanged glances before responding.

"Yes, we are. Why does that matter?" Deception harshly asked.

"Oh, right." He nervously ran his fingers through his spikey, blonde hair. "I was just going to say that's pretty cool because we have twins on this team, too!" He blushed as he nervously chuckled. "What a coincidence!"

"Shut up," Amari hissed. "Frisk, I need you to focus right now. If you don't have anything mission related to say, then don't speak!" She abruptly turned her attention back to the two women. "Now that you are here, I'd like you to accompany us as we secure the bottom floor." She turned to make her way back to the stairwell. "I'll give you a quick synopsis of our team's abilities while we walk."

The assassins flanked her as she set off to the stairwell.

She quickly updated them on the working details of her team as she devised a plan to approach any hostile threats waiting for them on the bottom floor.

"When we get to the door, Trace is going divulge the positions of the people who are scattered about. Once we know everyone's locations, I'll send the wolves in to surround the perimeter," she quickly advised. "Frisk, tell them they are to come forth to assist our team if needed."

Nodding, he began quietly barking and growling to the wolves.

"Terrain, I want you to stay behind in the stairwell with Mystic. If she wakes up, knock her back out. If anything happens, jump onto our frequency and alert us immediately."

"Will do."

"No, boss. *I will* stay behind and look after her," Quake interrupted.

She scowled. "No, you won't. You can't be trusted to make sound decisions when it comes to her. If she tries something, you won't be able to use force on her. You're the strongest member of this team, and we need you to be out there fighting, not babysitting."

"But, I'd be the most likely to get through to her," he pushed.

"I used to think that way once, same as you. And we almost lost Frisk because of it."

Quake's eyes quickly dropped to the floor, and he made no further effort to argue.

Noting his submission, she continued on with her directions. "We'll enter onto this floor in a straight line, breaking away one-by-one as we encounter each of the people in there. The order will be Quake, Deception, Frisk, Bolt, me, and Trace. If you encounter a hostage during your turn, guard them. If you must touch them, make sure you're wearing your gloves. If you see that any of your teammates require support, then you may use your own judgment to break away and assist as you see fit."

"Understood," all agents whispered in unison.

Trace approached the door at the bottom of the stairwell. "The first body is twenty feet to the east, the next is thirty-five feet north..." he rambled as he identified the six locations within.

"Understood. Let the wolves in. We'll all set off to the closest location to the east," Amari commanded as they pushed their way, single file, through the door.

Trace led them silently in the dark around the large boxes scattered throughout the floor.

It didn't take very long for them to encounter the first enemy. The giant soldier was working to drag two large pallets over to the door.

Quake broke away from the group and hid as they continued on to the next closest body, which turned out to be another soldier. This man, very much like the first, was packing away hardware into the factory's many boxes.

The group looked on as the solid image of Deception abruptly faded away, signaling her leave.

*That's so fucking cool. I wish I could do that. I'd be unstoppable,* Amari enviously thought as she continued on, following Trace.

As they broke off one-by-one, the team discovered everyone on the floor was a soldier. And all were moving large quantities of circuitry toward the door. Apparently, they weren't aware of the war-like situation outside the factory.

Amari hid behind a giant rack when she broke off from the line. When Trace, the last in their group, got into position, the team would attack at the same time.

The minutes ticked off before Trace's voice came through the Alpha Team frequency. "I'm ready."

## Chapter 16

Instantly the sounds of gunfire filled the factory, becoming deafening as it echoed throughout the room.

Removing her bow, Amari positioned two arrows against its cord. She took a moment to aim before firing, perfectly piercing each of her assigned soldier's eyes in one sweep.

The man fell on the ground. His hands flew up to rip the two arrows out of his skull, resulting in a sickening tearing and grating sound. Rolling over, he stood up and reached for his machine gun. Once in hand, he blindly sprayed the area, left to right, in a flood of high powered bullets.

*Shit!* Launching her shield, Amari enforced it with as much spiritual energy as she could muster while she dropped, flush against the floor. She released her twelve-inch Marine knife from its holster on her back and fisted the weapon as she army crawled over to her target. Luckily, her shield held up against the few stray bullets that managed to hit her.

As she got closer to the soldier, who was still blindly spraying outwards into the room, she fell outside of his chaotic range. Arriving at his booted feet, she rolled to her side, and slashed his Achilles tendon with all of her might, cleanly ripping through the delicate tissue.

The man fell back, and Amari scrambled to her feet, cutting the strap of his machine gun and tearing the weapon away from him. She then used his gun to spray an onslaught of hot bullets into his face at close range, completely decimating his head.

The soldier's body began to twitch as she studied it. As soon as she felt he was no longer a threat, she walked away.

Summoning her powers, she followed the thick cord leading to Trace.

She found him up on one of the tall shelving racks using the height advantage to fire down at his assigned enemy. In response, the soldier was spraying machine gun rounds in his direction.

From Trace's perch, he was able to see the glow of Amari's blue protective shield from down below. He met her eyes for only a moment before he went back to firing at his target.

Amari forced a substantial amount of spiritual energy into her shield. Once fortified, she crept up behind his soldier while clenching her knife in her right hand. When in range, she jumped onto his back and wrapped her left arm around his neck while squeezing her legs around him, locking her body into place. She hurriedly hacked away at his right eye.

She could hear the crunching sound of the bone as the man's eye socket began to crumble from the assault. She then focused her attention to the left one, stabbing her large knife harshly around in its general direction.

The man swung around frantically as he tried to grab hold of her.

Meanwhile, Trace assisted by taking a few shots at his ankles. It took three attempts before he landed one, and the soldier fell.

At the shift in gait, Amari jumped off of his back. And when the large man finally hit the floor, she ran over and studied his face, trying not to wince.

She'd succeeded in relieving him of his vision. However, he seemed unperturbed as he rolled over and quickly worked to get back on his feet.

*Stay the fuck down!* She fell flat to the floor and aimed her Glock an inch away from his ankle.

She didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

The blast shattered the connective bone, and the man dropped, prompting her to jump back up and swing her previously confiscated machine gun from over her back.

She fired upon his face until she, much like the first soldier, obliterated his head.

She heard Trace quickly running over to her as she leaned over the downed enemy and took away his weapon, hurriedly passing it over to her subordinate.

"Let's make our way over to the others," she said as she and Trace took off in a stealthy run.

Upon approaching Bolt, it was evident the woman didn't need any assistance. They found her looking over the smoking and charred body of her assigned soldier.

Noticing them, she flanked them as they collectively worked their way back to the door.



They found Frisk carefully firing upon his enemy while the four wolves worked to drag the man down to the ground. If it weren't for the soldier's colossal form, the ferocious animals would've succeeded.

Before the group could jump in to assist, the soldier's head fell neatly from his neck, rolling across the floor and stopping eerily at Frisk's feet. The group then watched as the soldier's arms were abruptly disconnected from his body at the biceps.

When the decapitated head abruptly levitated, Amari held back a scream. She became thankful she did as Deception reappeared to the group, holding the head in the air by the hair.

"Such a shame. This one was cute." Throwing the head in the air, she pivoted, splitting it in half with one quick sweep of her katana.

"Only one to go," Amari whispered as the group made their way back to Quake.

When they approached Quake's area, they found an immobilized soldier twitching on the ground. Apparently, all his limbs were broken.

*You are definitely the strongest man on our team. You did all that with your bare hands?* she thought in awe as she scanned around.

"Where is he?" Bolt whispered.

She launched her tracking powers, and the thick cord of energy shot to the entrance of the stairwell.

*You, idiot! God damn it, Quake. You abandoned us again!* She briefly held Frisk's eyes. "He's in the stairwell," she hissed as she made her way over to the doorway. "Frisk, call the wolves back."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Roger."

She only managed to take a few steps through the doorway before she froze, attempting to figure out just what she was looking at through her night vision eyewear.

Frustrated, she ripped the gear off and forced her powers up around her. The soft blue glow provided her with enough light to confirm what she couldn't initially understand.

Quake and Terrain were lying in a pool of blood on the floor, and Mystic was missing.

"Frisk!" She dropped to her knees before her two downed teammates. "I think Mystic took out Quake and Terrain!"

"What?" he shouted from behind her.

Trace forced his way to the front of the group, falling to his knees in front of his sister. His hands shook as he scrambled to check her for injuries.

Terrain had apparently been shot twice in the chest and was struggling to breathe.

Amari quickly found Quake was shot in the stomach.

"I messed up," he mumbled as Frisk pushed his way over.

Applying pressure to his stomach, he tried to slow the bleeding.

Amari took to the shared frequency. "This is Wraith. We need medical support immediately! I have two down, badly injured."

"Understood. We can only spare two medics for a short time. We have thoroughly cleaned up out here, but we have a ton of injured ourselves. Do you need any other type of support?" Cover roughly asked.

"Yes. We have three hostages here. We're going to need help getting them over to the pickup area," she said, becoming frustrated.

Her team already had to carry the two bodies of their teammates, one of which was huge, outside for help. She didn't want to bog the rest of the group down with the removal of the hostages as well. Honestly, she didn't want anyone touching them. Plus, Mystic was missing.

Launching her tracking powers, she focused on Mystic's spiritual presence. She frowned when the thick cord snaked up the stairwell.

"Trace, are you able to carry Terrain outside?" She tried to ignore the muffled sounds he made as he struggled to suppress his tears.

"Yes."

"Everyone else, I want you to help carry Quake outside."

"Understood," the balance of the agents softly said as they positioned themselves around the large man, each taking a section as they lifted him up.

Amari took the lead up the stairwell, following the cord and launching her shield over the large group behind her. As they passed

the landing for the first sublevel, she noticed the cord diverted through the door.

*She's with those damn hostages.* She flattened against the wall and allowed the team to pass her. "Once you get outside, and once medical help arrives for Quake and Terrain, I want whoever is available to meet me back here." Her eyes shifted to the door.

"She's in there?" Deception whispered.

"Yes, but it's not her. She's being controlled."

The group continued up the stairs while she guarded the door, watching the invisible cord it shifted gently about, mirroring Mystic's hidden movements.

\*\*\*

Alpha Team hurriedly exited the front of the factory and walked over to the open area filled with people. Apparently, all agents convened there with twelve hostages grouped in the center.

Upon their appearance, two of the medics pushed their way through the commotion, and Quake and Terrain were gently placed on the ground as they attempted to treat them.

"I'm going back for Wraith and Mystic," Frisk grumbled.  
"Trace, you stay here."

He nodded, watching as the medic removed Terrain's Teflon armor and cut through her vest.

"Would you two ladies mind assisting me?" Frisk requested.

Deception and Bolt exchanged glances before they followed him back to the factory.

"Whatever happens, don't kill the woman in there. I know that killing people is a shared specialty between you, assassins. But I'm ordering you to try to subdue her or knock her unconscious. You *can't* kill her."

The small group of three soon reconvened with Wraith back in the stairwell, and upon sight of them, she threw her shield over them.

"What's the plan?" Frisk whispered.

"We're going to take her by force. Expect that she'll try to kill us. We need to work around that and the hostages at the same time." She turned to the ninja standing at her right. "Deception, I'm really counting on your invisibility in there."

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Opening the door, Amari followed her energy cord to the middle of the floor. She found Mystic there attempting to drag the male hostage she touched earlier across to the doorway.

"Let him go!" She raised her Glock and aimed the weapon at her shoulder.

Mystic's head flew up as she studied her. "You won't shoot me."

"I will if I have to. Let him go!"

Ignoring her, she focused her attention back to dragging the man across the room.

Amari watched her for a moment before she shifted the aim of her weapon to the male hostage she was moving. "If you don't stop, I will kill *him*."

Mystic once again looked up, noticing the change in targets. "You can't."

"Oh, yes, I can. Accidents happen all the time on missions like these. I don't give one shit about that guy. I sure as hell won't hesitate to kill him."

She froze. "Don't. He needs our help. We need to get him out of here."

"No, *he* doesn't need our help. Quake and Terrain are the ones that need our help. They're outside dying, Mystic. You did that to them," she spat. "*You!*"

The petite psychic stared at her.

"You should be able to feel it. The man you love taking his last breath, all because *you* shot him—"

Mystic's hands flew to her head, and she hunched over her knees, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. "Shut up!" she screamed. "Get out of my head!" She grabbed her gun from its holster and aimed it at Amari.

Whatever she was trying to do was interrupted when her head swung back, and she was lifted up into the air.

Startling, she struggled to pull away from an unseen force.

Amari watched in slow motion as Mystic's armed hand flew up to shoot at her invisible attacker.

Without any hesitation, she swung her gun back over to the male hostage and shot him, point-blank, in the head.

The act instantaneously forced Mystic's hand to drop lifelessly to her side, and Deception revealed herself soon after, her right arm still tightly snaked around her neck.

With a deep breath, the beautiful assassin carefully released her hold on the woman, which prompted Frisk to rush forward to carry her.

Looking over the two hostages that were left, Amari said, "I know you assholes can understand me. So, I'm going to make this quick. You can either walk out of here and possibly have a life after all of this, or you can sit there and continue to be a massive problem, in which case I will not hesitate to execute you both."

A few moments passed, and the hostages began to move, lifting up shakily as if they haven't walked on their own in quite some time.

Steeling herself, she released her second Glock from its holster and positioned both her weapons at the hostages, one gun aimed at each.

"Frisk, go on ahead. We three ladies will get this garbage outside."

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It was twenty or so minutes before the three women made their way back to the gathering place in front of the factory.

Amari forced the hostages to hobble to the area on their own, and both were panting for breath.

"Go and join the rest of your group." She motioned to the twelve hostages huddled together in the center of the grounds.

Upon seeing Amari, the six team leaders quickly made their way over to her.

"All accounted for?" Cover said upon approach.

"All except for one hostage casualty," she spat. "It's time to call in the Airbus for a pickup." She turned her attention over to the leader of the Medical team. "What's the status of the injured?"

"We don't have any casualties... yet," Pulse curtly replied. "But, the sooner we can get back to base, the better."

As the leaders were distracted by the information exchange, they didn't notice as a bandaged Quake lifted to his feet and slowly shuffled his way over to hostages in the center of the grounds. No one paid any mind, as he stepped over the twisting and twitching bodies of the soldiers littering the earth beneath him. And certainly, no one noticed when he released his Glock from its holster and began shooting into the huddled grouping of their bodies.

At the sounds of the shots, the entire field erupted into a state of panic as agents from all sides tackled Quake and roughly disarmed him.

And Amari and Frisk instantly bolted over to the commotion as well.

Once restrained, several agents rushed over to the hostages to investigate the extent of the damages.

"Quake! What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Frisk screamed.

"How could you?" Amari shouted, out of breath, as she arrived in front of him.

He wouldn't acknowledge or respond to either of them.

"We have two dead," one of the agents shouted over at them. "And apparently, another is on the way!"

Turning, she ran over, her eyes sweeping over the bloodied hostages. She watched as the third victim quickly succumbed to her injuries, her eyes rolling back in her head as she took her last breath.

As the woman died, two soldiers littering the floor next to her feet abruptly ceased twitching.

*That's odd.* She wondered if there was a connection. But her thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of the Airbus overhead. The giant airship was making its way to the east side of the factory, preparing to land.

"All agents must assist in helping the injured and the hostages onto the plane first," she commanded into her earpiece. "Let's wrap this up quickly and go home."

## Chapter 17

Amari's eyes glossed over Terrain's body as she silently prayed to a higher power. The woman was lying on a stretcher and was positioned at the back of the plane on the floor. Her skin had a blue hue, and she'd been struggling to breathe for some time.

Both she and Frisk forcibly pulled Pulse over to her, begging her to further treat their friend.

Instead of getting angry about the interruption, she dropped to her knees and began to work on Terrain, pushing all the others, with exception to Trace, away.

Desperate to distract her mind and keep a hold on her sanity, Amari decided to call Anatomy.

The head of the Medical Research Department was obviously expecting a call from his assigned team leader at the conclusion of the Shanghai mission. But, what he certainly wasn't expecting was to be bombarded by Amari's furious voice.

"How dare you only provide us with four medics!" she hissed in disbelief. "Four medics for thirty-two agents?"

"Wraith, you must understand, my department isn't made up of people who excel at fighting. I couldn't just send a fleet of medics out unless the rest of the agents felt like protecting them during the entire mission," he calmly said. "I sent you all the agents at my disposal who have advanced healing capabilities and can also fight."

She took a steadying breath. "I'm sorry, but that's fucking pathetic! The Medical Research Department is *ROOT's* second-largest department on our base. Out of all the people on your staff, only four people can be sent out on missions? That isn't enough!"

From the corner of her eye, she watched Pulse cut a small hole between two of Terrain's ribs, using the wound to guide a sharp plastic tube directly into her lung.

Blood rushed out of the tube, and Terrain, finally, took a deep breath of air.

*Thank God.* She closed her eyes. "Anatomy? Please have a large team waiting for us when we arrive in the next hour and prepare the surgery rooms as well. Your staff is going to need to use them."

"Of course I will, Wraith," he soothingly said, before briefly pausing. "How'd everyone make out?"

She debated whether or not she should tell him the truth now or save it for later.

Now won out.

"Alpha Team was practically decimated," she whispered. "And Terrain is... in terrible shape. We're all praying she can hold on long enough to be operated on." She squeezed her eyes shut at the confession.

"*What?* What happened to her? Is Pulse there? Wraith put Pulse on the phone *now!*"

Amari looked down at the medic stitching Terrain's tube into place. "She's busy right now. She just put a tube into Terrain's lung to drain it."

She noticed how some of the color was finally coming back into her friend's face. Trace was lying down next to her on the floor, talking to her in whispers, making sure she knew he was there.

"*What?* Then find another medic and put them on the phone! Damn it, Wraith, put *someone* on the fucking phone!"

Pulse finally rose from the floor and turned to her. "She should be okay for now. Keep an eye on her and come get me if her condition changes."

"Thank you so much!" she gratefully said. "Oh, and Anatomy would like to speak with you." She passed over her phone.

Pulse announced herself before she began hurriedly speaking in medical terms. She stayed on the phone for about ten minutes as she updated Anatomy on Terrain's, and the remainder of the group's, condition before hanging up.

"I was putting that call off until we got closer to the base," she admitted. "He's romantically involved with this woman, is he not?" She pointed to Terrain. "Anatomy uses her picture as the wallpaper on his phone," she softly said. "Now the poor man is going to have to sweat out the status of her condition for the next hour before we make it to base."

As the medic walked off to tend to the multitude of agent injuries, Amari once again lowered to Terrain's side and squeezed her hand.

Her gaze shifted over to her, and she squeezed her hand in return.

"I'm so sorry."



Letting go of her hand, she lifted up her index finger, shaking it side-to-side.

Amari understood the gesture. *Don't be.*

Recapturing her hand, she held it over her heart. A few seconds went by before a tap on her shoulder interrupted the tender moment.

"Rai, it's about time to call in, no?" Frisk sympathetically whispered.

She nodded and stood, pulling out her phone. She wasn't surprised Inspect answered her call on the first ring.

Quickly walking through the sea of agents on the plane, she made her way over to the cockpit, where she'd be afforded some privacy. She then debriefed her department head on the status of the group's mission. When she got to the part about Quake, her speech slowed as she fought to explain what he did.

"Rai, you know I'm going to have to report this to Hush," Inspect growled, not attempting to suppress her anger.

"Yes, I know."

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Was he under the same mind control as Mystic?" she asked, a small quiver of hope falling from her voice.

"No, ma'am, I don't believe so. As far as I can tell, that doesn't seem to be the case."

Inspect sucked her teeth. "God damn it!"

"I know."

"What a fucking shit show." She took a deep calming breath. "Anyway, I'll be seeing you in an hour. I'll be on the runway to meet you when you land," she said, dismissing her before she hung up.

Walking back to her group, she searched for Frisk, wanting to update him on her call. She finally found him having a hushed conversation on the ground between the two assassin twins, the wolves were piled on top of him as they spoke.

When she approached, they made eye contact, and he immediately scrambled to get to his feet. He wrapped an arm around her back and led her a few feet away.

"It's okay, Frisk. I can come back."

"Nooooooooooooo! It's fine!"

Amari eyed him suspiciously before looking back over her shoulder at the twins. "Is something wrong?"

"*What?* No. No way. Everything's great!" he said with a bit too much enthusiasm.

"Busy flirting with the twins?"

"Huh? Hell, no!"

"I don't blame you if you were. A pair of gorgeous twins is every man's fantasy." She looked Bolt and Deception over from afar.

Frisk snickered. "More so than you know—"

"Are you afraid I'll tell Inspect?"

"Tell her what? I wasn't flirting with anyone."

"Of course you weren't," she said with mock innocence.

When he scowled, she decided to change the track of the conversation. "I spoke to Inspect, and she knows about Quake."

His expression fell into one of worry.

"It's not like I could hide it even if I wanted to. He killed those hostages in front of everyone on this mission."

He shook his head. "The Interrogation Department will probably get their hands on him after he receives medical treatment."

"Forget being suspended at this point, he's probably going to become a prisoner until the General can figure out what to do with him."

They looked over at Quake. The man's large body occupied the back wall of the plane near Terrain. He was sitting up with his hands cuffed behind his back. An awake and sobbing, Mystic was hunched over his lap. It appeared as though he was trying to soothe her as he bent over her small form, speaking to her in whispers while she nodded her head.

Frisk grimaced. "How long until we land?"

"Forty-five minutes."

"Then, let's fill him in on what's probably about to go down," he said under his breath as he made his way over to Quake, with Amari falling in line behind him.

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Renji was waiting on the runway for what seemed like an eternity. He snuck onto the landing strip to watch Amari's plane take off, and he'd sat there for the past nine hours, anxiously awaiting her return.

Of course, he wasn't going to mention that fact to anyone.

In case someone asked what he was doing, he had his laptop with him so he could say he was working remotely.

Technically he *was* manning his desk in a metaphorical sense.

The moment he saw, what looked to be, the entire Medical Research Department flood the runway, his heart began to pound violently in his chest.

*Why do they need so many people?*

Attempting to burn off the overwhelming amount of anxiety and worry washing over him, he paced.

It wasn't long before he noticed some of *ROOT's* top brass showing up on the runway as well. He watched on as Inspect quickly made her way out onto the landing strip, walking upon the pavement as though she owned it. As soon as the woman noticed him, she scowled and took off in a different direction.

He shook his head, trying not to let her behavior affect him, yet the knot of guilt he'd been carrying low in his stomach for the past day and a half painfully tightened against his will.

It was only when Anatomy burst onto the runway, running at top speed, that his anguish — along with a memory he wished he could forever bury — came back in full force.

Luckily, his sense of foreboding won out over his primal desire to tear Anatomy to shreds. *Something's wrong. He wouldn't be running if something wasn't wrong.*

As he turned his head, he noticed that several members of the Interrogation Department made an appearance along with General Hush.

*Why the hell is he here? What the fuck happened out there?* He nervously watched the large Airbus finally come into view overhead.

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When the Airbus finally landed, all agents worked together to move the hostages and the injured out to the waiting medical crews below.

*It looks like Anatomy brought his entire staff,* Amari absentmindedly thought as she, Trace, and Frisk gently carried Terrain's stretcher down the plane's steps and onto the runway with their four wolves following closely behind them.

They didn't have to go very far. Anatomy was waiting for them at the very bottom of the stairs. His face was panic-stricken as he watched them slowly carry her.

The minute they passed Terrain over to the emergency crew, Anatomy and Trace took off after her.

Amari, Frisk, and the wolves walked off to the side, hoping to stay out of the way as they watched more of the injured being carried out of the plane. Their hearts were heavy, as they knew Quake would soon be next.

Several moments passed before Quake's giant form finally came into view. He was walking on his own, flanked by Cover, Mystic, and several other agents. As he was loaded onto the waiting stretcher, Mystic, along with the General and several Interrogation agents, silently took off after him.

"I'm off to find Inspect." Amari launched her tracking powers and walked off.

Frisk remained where he was at the side of the stairs and watched as the balance of the people exited the plane. "Send her over to me when you're done."

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Renji set off to find Amari the moment the plane landed. But, instead of recklessly pushing his way through the large crowd, he waited until most of the medical crews cleared out, signaling the commencement of the treatment of the injured.

Using this as a cue, he quickly rushed to find her.

He found her with Inspect. Apparently, the two women were having a difficult conversation.

Frustrated he couldn't approach just yet, he looked for the rest of his team. He noted Frisk's scent was in the air, along with a strong odor of... *Bacon?*

Ignoring the randomness of the revelation, he worked his way over to Alpha Team's second in command, finding him waiting at the plane's stairwell. He was surrounded by four of Renji's wolves.

"What the hell are *they* doing here?" he roared.

The sudden and loud greeting jolted Frisk, and the man placed a hand over his heart. However, he quickly recovered and beamed at him. "Hi, sunshine!"

"Did *they* go on the mission? Who the hell brought them here?" He studied his wolves, genuinely horrified.

"Don't you remember? They were with you before you went full-blown psycho in Wraith's office. They've been hanging around the base ever since."

"What? No, I didn't. I had the pups with me."

"Maybe when you blacked out, some of your memories got a little confused?"

When Renji scratched his head, Frisk used the opportunity to kneel down and whisper something into Kiba's ear. The alpha wolf looked at him and seemingly nodded.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he shouted, now barely controlling his temper.

"Just telling Fang Jr. you're nuts," he answered. "He said he already knows, though."

"Get the fuck away from my wolves *now!*"

"I'd love to, but I have to wait right here for Inspect," he happily said. "But, *you* could make *yourself* useful and take them back to the nature preserve."

Dropping his eyes to Kiba, he loudly growled, finally addressing him.

The alpha wolf animatedly began growling and yipping in response.

"*What?* That's not possible. I could've sworn I had the pups with me!" His hands flew up to his temples, attempting to massage away an oncoming headache.

"See," Frisk said with a giant smile. "Listen to Jr."

"Stop calling him that!"

"It's his name!"

"His name is Kiba!"

"Right, his name is the Japanese word for 'Fang,' which, by the way, is the most uncreative name you could've possibly chosen, *Faaaaang!* I'm shocked you didn't name the rest of them 'Fang' in different languages as well."

Renji began to growl in warning.

"Don't get so angry. Are you looking for a repeat of yesterday?"

The harsh reminder forced him to back down, close his eyes, and take a deep breath. Unfortunately, the action led him to miss the bacon reward Frisk stealthily snuck over to Kiba.

"I want to talk to you about that," he said, opening his eyes. "I owe you an apology. I know it doesn't make anything right, but I just need you to know ... I'm sorry. Anything I can do to try to earn back your trust, just say so," he grumbled. "You were right... about a lot of things."

He seriously looked him over. "I know that wasn't you, Fang. But, I'm going to take you up on your offer... one day." His mouth turned up in a twisted smile. "I can forgive you for trying to kill me, but not for fucking up my beautiful face."

Before he could try to decipher exactly what he meant, Amari's familiar scent wafted over to him, completely diverting his attention.

Turning in her direction, he took off in a run, throwing his arms around her in a tight, protective embrace. He held her for several moments, unspeaking, before checking her for injuries.

"I missed you, too." She placed a kiss over his frantically beating heart. "And, I'm not injured. I promise."

Leaning down, he kissed her forehead. "How was the mission?" he curiously asked as he took in a deep draw of her scent.

"It didn't go well. Quake and Terrain are in the hospital. I'm actually on my way over there now."

"What? *Why*? What happened? Are they alright?" he worriedly asked, giving her his full attention.

"The hostages we saved over there were just like Ellie. However, one was strong enough to take over Mystic's mind, and he made her shoot them. Terrain is in critical condition with a collapsed lung. Quake was patched up, but will require surgery to remove the bullets lodged in his stomach."

"*You're kidding?*"

"I wish I was. Quake managed to lose his shit somewhere along the way and killed three of the rescued hostages in retribution. After his surgery, he's most likely going to disappear with the Interrogation squad."

Renji's mouth dropped. *We might never see him again if he goes with them.* The realization terrified him. "I'll go with you. You can

fill me in on the details as we walk." He entwined his hand with hers.

"Hey! Take the wolves!" Frisk shouted over to them. "I'm going to be busy for a while."

Never taking his eyes off of Amari, Renji whistled loudly, prompting the four large wolves over to his side. Unfortunately, he completely missed the waving motion Frisk was making under his neck with his hand in his mate's direction.

"I'll be right back." She removed her hand from his grasp and hurried over to her second in command.

"He's going to find out what you did eventually. You owe it to him to tell him," she hissed, whispering into Frisk's ear.

"I will, I promise. But, for right now, he owes me, and I just want to have a little fun with him first."

"Enjoy it then, because if you don't tell him by tomorrow, I will." She turned and walked away.

## Chapter 18

There was a massive sense of foreboding in the waiting room Amari was in with Mystic, Trace, and Frisk. They were waiting for an update on Quake and Terrain's medical status. Renji went to drop off the wolves and was due to join them in a few minutes.

Mystic looked like absolute hell. She'd spent the majority of the time apologizing to everyone for actions she obviously had no control over. She didn't have any memory of the attack. When she woke up on the plane, she was horrified when Quake explained to her what happened:

Wraith quickly picked up on the mind control and rightfully knocked her unconscious. Terrain was then assigned to guard her in the factory's stairwell. After Quake defeated his assigned soldier, he went to check on her and saw Terrain about to strike her.

His body moved without his permission, and he stepped between the two women, taking Mystic into his arms while trying to restrain her. And she shot him several times in the stomach as a result. When he hit the ground, she began to fire upon Terrain until she ran out of bullets.

If it weren't for their Teflon armor, both would've died. The news was sobering and heartbreaking all at the same time.

The knowledge of what she did and what she allowed the hostage to do truly broke Mystic's heart, and she hadn't been able to stop crying since.

When Renji entered the waiting room, he sat down next to her and put his arm around her, silently offering his strength. As she leaned into him, he attempted to soothe her. "I know exactly how you feel. It wasn't you doing those things. Please don't beat yourself up. They're both going to be okay. Quake and Terrain will survive this."

"But at what cost?" She sniffled. "Quake... he's... they're going to take him away. What he did, he's going to have to answer for that... I can't..." She heaved as she struggled to put sentences together.

"We're going to vouch for him. Not sure how much it's going to help, but Wraith and I will be pleading his case to the General," Frisk muttered.



"I just wish he didn't do that in front of thirty-six agents!" Amari huffed. "What the hell got into him back there?"

Trace kept his swollen eyes cast down to the floor. "Was he under the influence of mind control, too?"

"Did he talk to or touch any of the hostages at all?" Mystic softly asked.

"Nope, not once," Frisk admitted.

Amari shook her head. "Then, probably not."

The group contemplated the gravity of their friend's situation in silence. Thankfully, the appearance of Pulse diverted their morbid musings.

"I have news!" She happily approached their seated group.

All leaned forward, literally on the edge of their seats.

"We finished up on Quake. His body is still processing the effects of the anesthesia. When he's coherent enough, which will be soon, we'll allow one of you to go back there to visit him."

All eyes flew to Mystic.

She sniffled. "I'll go."

"What about my sister?" Trace demanded, his usual low and calm voice was entirely on edge.

"Terrain just came out of surgery. Anatomy worked on her personally. He healed all of the surrounding tissues and damage, and her lungs are now at one hundred percent. She'll actually be able to go back on active duty in as little as a week."

"*A week?* How the hell is that possible?" Frisk exclaimed. "She was barely alive a few hours ago!"

"As I said, Anatomy personally worked on her." Pulse widely smiled. "That's the one man in the world you want by your side if you're injured."

As if on cue, Anatomy pushed through the double white doors leading from the surgery wing of the hospital. "Alpha Team," he smoothly said as he approached them. "I'm thrilled the rest of you seem to be in one piece." His eyes landed on Amari.

The action had Renji snarling loudly, diverting his attention.

"Please try to relax, agent Fang. I just wanted to thank her for giving me a head's up about Terrain. I'm not a threat," he softly said.

Renji stopped growling but wouldn't divert his eyes or stop scowling.

"Anyway, thank you, Wraith. Terrain is going to be okay. Give her an hour or so to stabilize, and you should all be able to visit her."

"Thank God!" Trace's voice cracked as he bolted from his seat and shook his hand. "I can't thank you enough. You saved her," he huskily said. "Anything I can do for you, *ever*, please just ask!"

"I may take you up on that one day," he whispered, speaking more to himself than to Trace.

Once Anatomy left, Amari stood up and pulled out her cell phone. She walked over to the adjacent hallway planning to update Inspect while Frisk followed her.

"I want to talk to her when you're done," he said as he caught up.

Leaning against the wall, she watched her team as she dialed. When her boss answered, she hurriedly filled her in on the status of her injured teammates before she passed the phone over.

Taking the cell, Frisk disappeared further down the hallway to whisper something. He was grinning ear-to-ear.

*Apparently making some secret plans.*

She watched him as her thoughts returned to Quake. She wondered how the hell she could possibly help him.

The sound of hurried footsteps interrupted her. Two familiar faces came into view from the far end of the hallway. Deception and Bolt were both excitedly jogging toward the waiting room. When Amari waved, both women happily waved back to her.

As Frisk noticed the two agents, his happy expression fell from his face, and he glanced over at the waiting room. Hanging up the phone, he ran over to Amari and pulled her arm.

"We have to leave. Now!" He tried to drag her in the opposite direction.

"What? *Why?*"

"Just trust me. We need to go!"

"Could you just tell me what's going on?" She sank down on her heels and refused to budge.

He quickly ducked down, caught her waist, and slung her over his shoulder.

She responded by furiously punching him in the back. "You, asshole! Get off of me!"

The loud commotion that could easily be seen and heard from the waiting room brought Renji charging in their direction. He was obviously about to murder Frisk. However, when he got within two feet of them, he froze and tested the air, eyes popping wide.

Slowly, his head turned in the direction of the two women rushing down the hallway.

Amari spared a moment to study the abrupt change in Renji's expression before Frisk hurriedly tried to flee with her on his back.

He didn't get very far.

As she wasn't able to land a real blow through his Teflon vest, she'd taken to tickling him under his armpits, which forced him to drop her, ball up, and cover his sides.

"Did you just tickle me?" he incredulously asked, before straightening and trying to recapture her.

"Get the hell away from me!" She fell into her fighting stance. "I will not hesitate to kick your ass! Tell me what the fuck is going on!"

Deception's lust-filled tone interrupted her murderous musings.

"Fang! It's so nice to see you! We heard you were here and just *had* to come and say, 'hi' before leaving the base."

Her head furiously swung away from Frisk and over to the two twins capturing *her man* in a tight and overly familiar hug.

"It's been way too long," Bolt purred as her hand swept through Renji's hair.

"I tried," Frisk mumbled before he snuck away.

To his credit, the wolf demon was frantically trying to peel both women off of him as he backed away. His efforts were rewarded with his crashing awkwardly into the wall.

Both women giggled before they were abruptly cut off by a firm commanding voice from over their shoulders.

"Get. Off. Now. I'm only going to tell you once." The order was followed by the sound of cracking knuckles.

The twins released Renji and faced her.

"Is he on duty?" Deception wondered, obviously trying to figure out what was wrong. "We just wanted to catch up before we returned to China."

"No, he belongs to me. So hands-off," she said, getting straight to the point. She thanked God that her voice was calm because, on the inside, she wanted to murder the bitch.

She widely smiled at the twins, but there was no mistaking the warning she was giving.

The twins exchanged worried glances before Bolt spoke, "Sorry. We used to... know each other... once. We didn't know you two... Um."

Ignoring her, she swiftly walked between the two women and roughly grabbed Renji's hand, dragging him away.

"Well, now you know," she casually called out over her shoulder.

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*Every man's fantasy, indeed, Amari seethed. What a fucking pig!*

She tried to ignore Renji's stumbling as he tried to keep up with her quick stride.

*You can't be mad at him for having a past, her mind chided. You have one, too.*

Ignoring the thought, she instead focused on her mate's well known sexual reputation across their international organization, which further incited her fury.

It was only *after* he accepted the position on her Alpha Team and began living on the base that she learned of 'Agent Fang's' legendary status in their organization. Unfortunately, his notoriety wasn't based upon any of his work-related talents.

Apparently, female agents spoke of him only in whispers over the years, and over time, word seemed to have really gotten around. According to everything she heard, her man practically had sex God status. Women reportedly intentionally sought him out after missions just to have a go at him.

Hell, Renji's file was historically the most accessed file on their agency's database. And she was pretty sure his staggering numbers didn't have anything to do with any of the department heads checking out his skill set for potential missions... and everything to do with female agents pulling up his file photos.

She was a lot of things, but naïve wasn't one of them. She saw firsthand how women desperately threw themselves at him. Hell, she couldn't entirely blame them. As much as she hated to admit it, she understood why.

One look at his cut, masculine body, that beautiful-as-all-hell face and those dangerous, smoldering eyes, and you instantly knew the man was sure to give you the orgasm of a lifetime. Shit, it took her what? *Two days* after finding him again before she practically threw herself at him as well?

She scowled at the memory of her initial assertiveness with him.

Their first time together was her most precious memory, but at the moment, she felt nothing but disgust with her behavior that night. Before she demanded that he take her, which she was sure many other women did just as often before her, she didn't even attempt to use any protection, which was something she had always been scrupulous about.

It wasn't until much later on that she found out wolf demons couldn't be affected by, or carry, human diseases. She didn't once think to even bring it up until Renji mentioned it in passing right after he moved in with her.

She always prided herself on her cool head and rational decision-making abilities. But, her abhorrent lack of them when it came to her mate was privately mortifying.

She was at least thankful she was on birth control at the time because who knew if it even would've crossed her mind otherwise before they first had sex. And knowing that somewhere along the line they met the wolf demon requirement for reproduction, and what Renji was pumping into her wasn't the usual blanks he'd been shooting throughout his very long 'unmated' life, she could have very well become pregnant.

How was that for a reality check?

*You're losing it, Amari. You're becoming weak.*

Since reuniting with him again, she'd become nothing more than an absolute insecure mess on the inside even though she would never openly show it on the outside. She couldn't help but feel overshadowed by the sheer volume of women he'd probably been with before he mated with her in his five hundred and thirty-four

years of life. There was just no escaping the fact that he could have anyone he wanted.

Yet, for some reason, he chose her.

The knowledge should've provided some comfort, but for some reason, it unnerved her instead.

*Doesn't help that those two were fucking gorgeous either, her mind spat. Sexy and deadly. How appropriate for him. A real shame, I actually fucking liked them...*

Amari roughly shook her head, attempting to clear it.

She would not spiral out of control, especially not in front of Renji... about *this*. Because, when life handed you your soul mate on a silver platter, you didn't show your gratitude by turning into a tearful, sobbing mess. And you certainly didn't guilt the love of your life about a past he could do nothing about.

No, you held your head up, and you remained strong because that was what they needed right now. With all of Renji's issues as of late, one of them needed to stay calm and in control—

"Amari?"

Ignoring him, her thoughts shifted in another direction entirely.

*Frisk fucking knew about them!* she realized, connecting the dots on his earlier bizarre behavior. *Whose side is he on, anyway? So much for having my back. He's supposed to be my best friend for Christ's sake!*

"Baby, please talk to me."

Halting, she slowly looked back over at him, smiling sweetly.

Renji took a deep breath. "It was a long time ago."

"A past relationship?" she innocently asked, wondering how the hell it could be possible to have anything more than a 'fuck me senseless' type of relationship with those two people.

"Not really. We've all crossed paths a few times on assassination jobs. We just spent some time together every now and again."

*Yup. Just sex,* she confirmed, her thoughts fading back to a similar type of 'relationship' she once had with agent Sleeper.

She huffed. "Sounds lovely. You don't have to tell me this."

"I don't want to hide anything from you."

"I don't want you to either, but you don't have to delve into any detail here. I get it."

"It wasn't anything serious—"

"I said, I get it. Okay?"

"Are you mad at me?"

*Yes!* She shook her head. "No, I'm a little jealous, but I'm not mad," she lied through clenched teeth. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"What could *you* possibly have to be jealous of?"

"Coming from the guy who almost killed Anatomy just for touching my face? Hmm, I don't know, Renji. How could I possibly feel anything outside of joy and elation after seeing those two women practically throw themselves at you? And knowing that you..." she hissed, beginning to lose her patience.

*It's been one very long fucking day. I just want to go the hell home and pretend all of the shit that's going on right now, with everyone, isn't really happening.*

## Chapter 19

Amari sat upright in bed covered in a cold sweat, her hand clutching her heart as it pounded against her chest.

After the encounter with Ellie, the nightmares were frequent.

Weeks ago, when Mystic put safeguards in her mind, she'd warned her that the nightmares would continue. And, they did. However, they were real nightmares conjured up by her subconscious mind, nothing like the vivid and terrifying experience when Ellie was pulling strings in the background. Most times, she didn't even remember the details upon waking.

Unfortunately, this wasn't one of those times.

Taking a calming breath, she headed to the bathroom, willing the images of Renji and the two blonde twins engaged in various sexual positions to get out of her head.

Leaning over the sink, she took in her reflection as she gently coasted her hand over her face, tracing invisible lines against her pale, smooth skin.

Amari knew she was beautiful, in fact, she was very confident about that fact. However, sexy wasn't a word she'd readily use to describe herself.

*Those two were sexy. They just oozed sex appeal. I can't blame him for... Her hand dropped from her face, her eyes squeezing shut. Stop thinking about that! Stop envisioning their crazy orgies!*

Backing away from the mirror, she put more of her body into the view of its frame.

Her long, black hair was silky and fell in waves down her lower back. She was tall and toned. The definition of her muscles traced under her skin at moments when she moved a certain way. Her chest was of average size, and her breasts were round and naturally perky. Her long-lashed almond eyes were large, and a sparkling blue, and her face was oval, features angled and framed by long feathered bangs. Her cheekbones were high, and her lips were pink and plump.

*I look like a porcelain doll. Not a sex kitten.* She went over to the sink and splashed warm water on her face. *Why do I have to keep bumping into his exes? Granted, there have only been two so far... well, three actually... that I know about... but what the hell?* she thought as she embraced the soothing feel of the water. *I have a*



*suspicion this won't be the last time either. And of course, I have to stay calm and act like an adult about everything. Meanwhile, he's allowed to lose his shit and fly off the handle because of uncontrollable instincts... blah, blah, blah.*

She pictured the scene in the hospital hallway, but instead of commanding the two women to get off Renji, she imagined ripping them away by the hair and proceeding to beat the ever-loving shit out of them.

She smiled. *I so wish I could've done that. That's what he would have done if he were me.* The revised memory made her feel a little better.

Slowly exiting the bathroom, she walked back to bed. It was early dawn, and she only had a few hours before she needed to get ready for work.

After yesterday's mission, she was sure she'd be stuck on a multitude of conference calls, debriefing sessions, and mission reports. Plus, she wanted to use every free moment to visit Terrain and Quake.

*Today is really going to suck.* She lifted the covers and embraced the warm blast of body heat that spilled over her. Thankful for the warmth in the cold chill of the bedroom's air, she gently lowered into bed and scooted against Renji. The man could seriously double as a heater.

As she cuddled into him, his strong arms wrapped around her. He then nuzzled into her neck before stilling again, lightly snoring.

Relaxing in his warmth, she closed her eyes and quickly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

\*\*\*

Amari was furiously typing up her mission report when the loud ringing of her phone rudely interrupted her. She promptly saved the document before reaching over to pick it up.

"Agent Wraith," she crisply said.

"Agent Wraith, the General would like to speak with you. Please report to his office," agent Demise, Hush's secretary, quickly said into the phone.

"Of course, I'll be right there." She hung up and headed to the elevator bank.

Noticing her as she passed his desk, Renji popped up and fell in line behind her.

"I'll walk you to wherever you're going. I can't stay at that fucking desk another minute. It's torture."

She took pity on him. Being stuck in the office all day was the worst possible punishment for someone like him.

"Alright, we're headed to the top floor." She winked over her shoulder.

"Are you and Frisk going to talk to Hush about Quake now?"

"We submitted the request, but we have yet to hear back about an appointment."

"Why are you going up there, then?"

"I'm not sure. He calls, and I come running. You know how it is. It's probably a mission."

As the couple walked into the General's waiting area, Renji took a seat while Amari checked in with his secretary. A few minutes later, she was escorted down the familiar maze leading to Hush's private office.

When they arrived at the thick redwood door, Demise knocked briskly.

"Come in," the voice on the other side of the door called out.

Nodding, Demise opened the door, waving her in.

"Agent Wraith."

Hush stood in greeting as she approached his desk and saluted. After she returned the gesture, they both lowered into their seats. The General didn't waste any time for pleasantries on this visit. He quickly got right down to business.

"We have a situation. I need you to meet somebody. Think of it as a solo mission."

She nodded, waiting for the large man to continue.

"How to explain this..." he quizzically said. "The main shareholder of Tsuki Industries would like to meet with you."

"I'm sorry. *What?*" she retorted. "How would anyone outside of *ROOT* even know who I am?"

"He knows who you are because he also happens to be the founder of our secret organization."

*Huh?* She shook her head in disbelief. "I beg your pardon, General. But, I still don't understand," she stammered.

He sighed, obviously trying to find a simple way to explain.

"*ROOT* was founded near the end of World War II by one man. This man created our organization with the sole purpose of protecting world peace. With his funding and his initial guidance, *ROOT* has grown over the years into what it is today. Our founder allows us to run this organization, this giant machine, as we best see fit, never involving himself any further than providing us with funds. Privately, he's involved in every sector of industry and has numerous global industries. It is the profits from these private investments that pay our bills."

*Why would he want to speak with me?* she thought as she processed all of this information. "Is he looking to speak with me about yesterday's Shanghai mission, then?" She recalled the circuits the Ultimate Soldiers were trying to steal. "Will he be coming to the base to meet with me?"

"No. We'll be sending you to him. No one has ever seen this man or spoken directly to him, not even me. He has numerous identities and communicates with us discreetly through others. He will not chance coming here and being seen," he grumbled. "And, he does likely want to speak with you about Shanghai, but I wouldn't know for certain because he didn't say."

"Understood. When and where will I be meeting him?"

"You'll be meeting at the Ryunique restaurant in Seoul in six hours."

*Ryunique is the most expensive luxury restaurant in all of Seoul, South Korea,* she realized. "Am I meeting him over dinner?"

Hush shuffled through some papers on his desk. "Yes, you are. Make sure you dress appropriately."

"Am I going there on my own, or will I be provided with an escort?"

"I'll have Demise drop you off and pick you up."

"How will I know who the founder is if no one has ever seen him before?"

"He saw a copy of your file. He knows what *you* look like. He'll find you."

"Is there anything I should know before going in?"

"Yes. Don't ask *any* personal questions. Whatever he asks, answer honestly and directly. You're there to provide him with information, not to try to pull any out of him. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Wraith?"

"Yes?"

"This is strictly confidential. As in, don't tell another soul about this, confidential. You aren't allowed to speak of your knowledge about the founder, or of this mission, to *anyone but me*. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. You are dismissed. Demise will be in touch to arrange the ride."

"Thank you," she said before attempting to regain his ear. "Is it possible I could speak to you for a moment about my teammate, Quake?"

"Not now," he barked. "I'll contact you once I have a little more information on my end."

Getting up from her chair, she saluted and left the office.

\*\*\*

"You really can't tell me anything?" Renji whispered in the elevator as the couple made their way back down to their floor. He didn't know why, but his instincts were kicking up, and he was drowning in an incredible sense of foreboding.

"No, nothing. I'm sorry. I wish I could."

He felt another wave of dread wash over him. "I understand. How long will you be away?"

"Probably a few hours. I might have to check back in with Hush after, but I'm not sure."

"When's your next day off?" he asked, now wholeheartedly looking for a distraction. "I feel like, with all the recent drama going on, we haven't really gotten to spend any good quality time together. I really miss you."

She turned to face him. "I know. I feel the same way. The timing is tough right now with you, Quake, and Terrain being out of service. But, let's pick a few days to get off base and just enjoy each

other for once, without any distractions or missions or demonic bloodlust..."

He chuckled, pulling her against his chest. "That sounds nice. I'll plan something, then." His voice dropped to a low, husky drawl as he fixated on her mouth.

Amari leaned into him and summoned her tracking powers, engulfing him in her comforting and loving essence.

He closed his eyes and felt his muscles relax, his worry quickly leaving him.

His mate used this opportunity to pull his lips against hers in a wet and promising kiss. Melting against her, his tongue lazily slid over hers as it explored her mouth.

Unfortunately, the passionate moment was interrupted when a sea of agents flooded into the elevator at the Reconnaissance Department's floor.

Someone snickered. "Get a room!"

"Guess we're going to have to wait until after your mission," he grumbled as he pulled her from the elevator.

She pointed at the stairwell. "Not if I can help it."

Renji devilishly smiled, took her hand, and pulled her in the direction of the stairwell. "You're on!"

"This time around, let's check first to see if anyone is in there." She laughed. "You'd think two master trackers would be able to pick up on that sort of thing."

"We would have if we weren't so distracted. I seem to recall we had *other* things on our mind at the time."

\*\*\*

Amari spent the next few hours finishing her mission report while looking up the level of formal wear required for her dinner at Ryunique that evening.

Demise had been in touch and would be escorting her off of the base at six. This would allow her two hours to get to the restaurant, and plenty of time for her to settle before *ROOT's* most elusive person approached her.

As soon as she submitted her report, she packed her things and left her office. She was done for the day.

Briskly exiting the office building, she walked across the grounds and to her apartment to get ready.

After their earlier quickie, Renji went to the training center to blow off some steam. But, she knew he was really trying to find an excuse to escape for a few hours. The lack of fieldwork, coupled with his unbalanced hormones, was slowly driving him insane, and she took pity on him.

Pulling out her phone, she sent Anatomy a message.

*"When would you be available to discuss that wolf demon problem? I spoke to a contact of mine, and he provided me with some interesting information."*

He responded within a few minutes.

*"Could you do tomorrow?"*

*"Depends on the time. What works for you?"*

*"How's ten in the morning sound?"*

She quickly checked her schedule.

*"It works. See you then."*

Pocketing her phone, she entered the main lobby of her apartment building.

*I hope he's able to figure something out. We can't go on like this,* she sadly thought.

## Chapter 20

Renji had just spent two hours beating the crap out of himself at the gym, aiming for the kind of physical exhaustion that would drive down to the bone. But, when he packed up and went home, he still felt tense and on edge.

Two days ago, when Amari's powers engulfed him before she left for Shanghai, it relaxed him, and he felt the calming effects of it long after. But when she did it earlier, the results quickly wore off, and he was once again worried about her secret mission.

For some reason, he didn't feel as mentally prepared to properly send her off like he did the last time. What added gasoline to the fire was the way his woman was dressed for this *so-called mission*.

As she exited their bedroom to greet him, his heart slammed in his chest, and he held his breath. Even with the confirmation of her scent, he had to do a double-take just to make sure it was really her.

She looked absolutely stunning.

She was wearing a black, satin and lace dress. The satin material tightly hugged her body as it wrapped around her chest and hips before falling loosely and spilling down to the floor. The fabric had a long slit starting mid-thigh, running down the length of her left leg. The lace swept up the satin fabric in decoration, snaking around her breasts before sweeping over her right shoulder, supporting her chest. She'd chosen a pair of black, strappy, open-toe heels to complete the outfit.

Her hair was swept into a loose French twist, with wisps intentionally falling from its constraints. Her long bangs, as usual, framed her face, and she was wearing makeup today as well. She went with a brown, smoky eye look, and her naturally long lashes were further lengthened and fanned from mascara, and her lips were adorned with red lipstick. Two simple silver dangle earrings accented the look.

Her appearance was elegant, conservative, and sexy at the same time.

"What kind of fucking mission is *this*?" he demanded once he regained the use of his mouth.

\*\*\*

*Here we go*, Amari thought as Renji's marking scent flooded the room, covering her, and everything else in it, with the smell of cut wood and fresh earth.

"It's not the kind you're obviously thinking of." She tried to remain calm.

His eyes slowly drifted down her body, and he openly gaped at her. "I don't understand how that could be possible," he said, obviously coming to the wrong conclusion.

"I'm not going off to seduce anyone. Don't even put that thought into your head."

His eyes flared. "Then what will you be doing dressed like this? Jumping out of a jet to invade a terrorist base?"

"Something like that," she sarcastically said.

"*What?*"

"Nothing." She took a deep breath. "Can't you just tell me I look nice? You know, something normal?"

"Are you insane?" he roared.

"Guess not." She walked passed him to the kitchen counter, pausing to grab her purse.

He quickly appeared behind her, nearly scaring her half to death. "I'm coming with you."

"Like hell, you will!" she shouted, entirely out of patience. "Do you want to be discharged, Renji? Is that it? Because that seems to be your goal as of late."

"I'll shadow you. *ROOT* will never know."

"You've lost your God damn mind! You know, the other day, I was actually very proud of you for not kicking up a giant fuss when I went to Shanghai without you. I finally thought we were making some real progress. Yet, here we are, right back to the crazy talk and overprotective crap."

"This is different! I can handle seeing you suit up in your tactical gear and run off to kill the bad guys a little better than *this*..." He frantically gestured at her appearance. "This is totally different!"



"What if I told you I was going to a corrupt politician's fancy dinner party so I could sneak away and hide bombs in the party hall's foundation?"

"Is that what you're doing?" He sounded impressed.

"Answer my question."

"I guess that wouldn't be so bad," he admitted. "But, can't you just dress like a member of the wait staff, though?"

She shot him a dirty look.

"Do you understand the number of men that are going to be harassing you?"

"I'd hope so. Otherwise, I think I'm bound to lose what little remains of my self-confidence at this point," she mumbled under her breath.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Look, I'd love to stay here and argue with you, but I have to go."

He turned down the hallway. "Give me a few minutes to gear up. I'll be quick."

"You *aren't* coming! If you try to do anything stupid tonight, I'm going to report you to Hush myself. Then you can get used to *never* seeing me again since you'll no longer be a part of this organization!"

He froze in place, watching as she stomped over to him.

"Renji look at me," she demanded. "I need you to promise me you won't leave the base tonight. Swear it to me."

He met her eyes but didn't immediately respond.

"Baby, please. I'm begging you. I need you to promise me."

Turning his head away, he stared at the floor. "I promise. I won't leave the base tonight," he choked out with a strained voice.

"You swear?"

"Yes."

Reaching out, she turned his face back to hers. "Thank you." Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly. "I trust you."

When she broke the embrace and left the apartment, she missed the low, "You shouldn't," that tumbled from his lips as he stared off after her.

\*\*\*

Amari arrived at the restaurant early as planned. Demise spent the entire ride venting about the General and her crazy work schedule. The woman was nice, and apparently, from some of the stories she told, had the patience of a saint.

"Just message me when you need to be picked up."

Nodding, she turned and walked into Ryunique. As she entered the small hallway leading to the main floor, she realized that no expense was spared in the design of the place.

The walls were decorated in fine art. The lighting was dim, accented by the many candles covering the tables and floors. There was also soft music playing in the background.

The oddest detail about the place was the lack of patrons.

A young woman who was obviously part of the staff, possibly the hostess, watched her come in and hurried over to her. "Good evening, Miss. I'm so very sorry, but we're closed."

*You don't look closed. Aside from the lack of customers, the entire place seems to be up and running,* she thought. "I'm sorry? There must be some mistake."

"My apologies, but there is no mistake. We're fully booked for tonight's service, we can't allow anyone else in."

"But I'm supposed to be meeting someone here."

"That's unfortunate."

*Did the General make a mistake?* She doubted it. "You don't look booked." She looked around the empty room.

The woman blew her off. "Again, we apologize for any inconvenience. You're welcome to try again tomorrow."

Without warning, a crackle of electricity made its way up Amari's spine.

*Someone's watching me.*

Turning away from the woman, she began to scan the area. Her heart started pounding in her chest as her soul began to roar in warning.

*Danger?*

"That woman is with me," a deep male voice smoothly advised from the back of the restaurant.

The hostess bowed lowly and hurriedly ran off to busy herself at the bar.

*No, not... danger...*

Her attention was now fixated on the stranger who called out to them. She couldn't get a good look at his face in the low lighting, and he was standing very far away. Apparently, he'd been watching her entire exchange with the hostess from the shadows.

*Remembrance?*

She tried to silence the alarm bells sounding off in her body as she took a few steps forward.

The man was wearing a very expensive, tailored gray suit. She could also see he paired the metallic color with a white button-down shirt and a red tie. She couldn't yet make out his face.

"You must forgive me for not speaking out sooner, agent Wraith. The photo attached to your file does not do you fair justice, and, as you must understand, I had to be sure of who you were first."

*This elegant manner of speaking...*

It was at this moment that *ROOT's* founder stepped forward, gracefully making his way over to her with an absolute air of importance following his long stride.

*It can't be...*

It was only a moment before he stood before her, crowding her.

His long, blonde hair was pulled back into a lowly tied ponytail at the nape of his neck, and his cold, slitted, green eyes were downcast from his towering height, intensely studying her face.

"You reek of wolf."

\*\*\*

Hakai, cold and ruthless, strategic and cunning, was above such senseless things as emotions and compassion. Such idiotic feelings were reserved for lesser beings, not someone of his great power and high stature.

This was why the words that unconsciously fell from his lips stunned him so.

When he arranged this private meeting with agent Wraith, he expected to discuss the reasoning behind her investigation into his company's financial statements. He also wanted her to report her findings from her recent mission to his manufacturing plant in Shanghai.

At least that's what he told himself.

When he discovered *ROOT's* Intelligence Department hacked into Tsuki Industries' financial records, under the orders of Agent Wraith, he wanted to know who she was and why she was poking her nose into his affairs. When he pulled up her agency file and looked at her picture, her face called forth a long-buried memory of someone he lost so very long ago.

*She looked just like Kichi.*

Kichi was the one woman who truly captured his stone-cold heart and flooded it with warmth and love. She showed him what it was like to truly live, and he did so, devotedly, at her side, for a very long time.

When he lost her, his warm beating heart once again stilled, turning cold and frigid anew. And he buried her memory deep inside of him, trying to forget her to continue on.

Living wasn't something he did anymore. He merely existed, burying himself in his work while trying to find a new purpose for his long and dull life.

But then he saw Wraith's picture, and he remembered so many things long forgotten and buried.

He could have easily found out what Wraith was looking for without involving himself. He could have easily gotten a copy of her Shanghai mission report, as well. He did own *ROOT*, after all. But, for a reason unknown to him, he found he needed to speak with her, look upon her, *smell* her.

When the overwhelming stench of wolf demon invaded his nose, a scent so powerfully male and primal in its foulness, that he, of all people, couldn't even find the smallest trace of Wraith's own natural scent within it, he felt...

*Cheated.*

So at this moment, Hakai, the master of self-control, was contemplating why in the hell he acted upon a single moment of anger and said something so incredibly impudent.

He also tried to process why he felt so dejected by the absolutely horrid and disgusting smell of wolf demon encasing her in the first place.

As he studied the appropriately named agent before him, he patiently waited for her reaction. Apologizing wasn't in his character.

He already did it once tonight, and he didn't want to endure the words again if he could avoid it.

The beautiful woman stared at him with an expression of horror and was obtusely gaping.

He had obviously insulted her.

As he inwardly steeled, preparing to ask her forgiveness, she saved him by speaking first.

"Do you remember me?" she squeaked, her voice a shaky whisper.

He noticed she began to worry at her hands. "Have we met before?"

"Yes, five hundred years ago," she whispered as her eyes bored into his.

*Five hundred years ago?* He blinked. "You don't appear to be well. Are you alright?"

"You really don't remember me?"

His head tilted to the side as he intently studied her. "No, if we met, I would certainly remember it."

She scowled. "Obviously, not."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Drop the pleasantries, Hakai, they don't suit you. How in the hell do you not remember who I am? Granted, it's been five hundred years, and I look nothing like I did, but still!" she foolishly said, anger now lacing her tone.

She crossed her arms against her chest and tapped her foot.

\*\*\*

The use of his name had the desired effect, and Hakai's carefully placed mask momentarily fell, which provided Amari with the rarest of sights to behold as his eyes widened, and his mouth slightly opened in shock.

"Kichi?" he whispered, the smallest hint of desperation appearing in his voice.

He took hold of her shoulders and pulled her to him while he unabashedly took a deep whiff of her hair.

This wasn't the response she was hoping for.

In witnessing the moment of vulnerability from, of all people, the leader of the dog demons, she truly felt overwhelmingly guilty. However, the name he called her was once a very familiar one.

*Kichi? Tenrai's little sister?*

"No," she softly said. "No, I'm sorry, I'm not. My real name is... was... Risa... back then. I was a holy user who belonged to the Junsuina Temple. I died in the battle with Wynter to reclaim the Anamnesis Terrene. I was a good friend of Tenrai's. When you mention Kichi, are you talking about his little sister? If so, I remember her very well. She was an incredibly brave and happy girl. She often made flower chains for me. It was incredibly sweet."

Instantly releasing her, he stepped away, his eyebrows lightly knitted.

*Great. Now he's pissed. Smooth move, Amari.*

"You look just like her," he rumbled.

*Apparently, he's not going to let this go. Was he involved with Kichi? She pictured the thirteen-year-old from her temple. How in the hell would that have happened? I thought he hated humans.*

"Exactly like her," he pushed, interrupting her silent musings.

"I'm sorry. But did you and Kichi... I mean... Tenrai's little sister..." she sputtered.

It only took a few seconds for his expression to quickly smooth, his mask falling back in place. "Risa was Tenrai's woman. She was the priestess who stumbled often and was astoundingly useless. You are *her* reincarnation?" he said in disgust.

"I *wasn't* useless! I'll have you know I was just going through an awkward stage back then!" she said, genuinely insulted.

Hakai silently stared at her waiting for an answer to his question.

"Yes, I'm her reincarnation," she said in a huff. "But I'm *not* her. I just used to be."

He seemed to absorb this information, twisting it over in his mind while he stared at her.

The silence between them stretched out.

"Can we sit down? Maybe talk?" she asked, her voice warm and inviting. "I'd love to catch up with the ever mighty lord of the dog demons."

## Chapter 21

Hakai finally seemed to snap out of his trance, and he swept his arm over, motioning to a readied table. As Amari approached, he pulled out her seat and took her hand as she lowered into the chair.

*He's such a gentleman now. Maybe's he's actually matured a bit over the past five centuries and stopped acting like a complete spoiled brat!*

"I honestly never would have believed you to be the type to start a secret organization hell-bent on maintaining world peace. You must have really changed over the years. I thought you hated humans even though you tolerated them."

"*ROOT* was *Kichi's* dream," he corrected. "She used to believe good would always triumph over evil. When she was... taken from me, the decision to create the organization was in homage to this very belief. It was something that would have made her very happy."

"Are you talking about Tenrai's sister?" she tried yet again.

His face imperceptibly softened, and his voice deepened an octave in his response. "Yes."

*Get the fuck outta here! How the hell did that happen?* she wondered. "Do you mind if I asked how she passed?"

He ignored the question, instead, busying himself with the menu.

*He would mind. Next question.* She attempted to change the depressing mood. "Do you remember Renji?"

Green eyes held blue. "The uncouth alpha of Japan's United Tribe?"

"Yes!"

"Is *he* the one who corrupted your scent?"

*What an odd way to phrase a question,* she thought. "Yes, we are... involved." She struggled with the answer, as she didn't really understand what exactly he was asking her in the first place.

"Humph." He snorted dismissively as he returned his attention to the menu. "So that foul concoction is his marking scent then? Exactly how, pray tell, would such an atrocious act even be possible?"

"Um, I'm not really sure." She hesitated. "It just sort of... happened." She didn't quite like his tone.

"So, uncivilized."

"You're being completely rude," she hissed, earning herself a quizzical look.

"I did not mean to offend."

"Of course, you did. I think I preferred the fake you from earlier. That person was much more pleasant."

\*\*\*

Hakai studied the brash woman, noting how anger flushed her cheeks. She was stunningly beautiful and looked exactly like his dearly departed Kichi, with exception to her unique eyes. Unfortunately, the wretched odor Renji apparently bathed her in diminished her appeal, and he was curious as to how such a thing could even be possible.

From the wealth of knowledge he amassed in the seven hundred years he spent walking the Earth, he knew very well that wolf demons were *incapable* of mating with humans.

Wolf demons, much like the wolves they controlled, were primitive beings. Their existence was tightly bound to the chain of survival. Unlike their superior dog demon descendants, they were inadaptable, hardwired to cling to primal instincts.

If he had to describe it simply, dogs could be compared to humans and wolves could be compared to their Neanderthal ancestors. Wolf demons were a race that, at one time, were on the brink of extinction. Those who couldn't evolve to adapt to the changing environment would die, this was life's requirement across all species.

To know that a wolf demon, and not just any wolf demon, *Renji*, was able to break away from the metaphorical chain, was unnerving. He briefly wondered what his wife's brother would think of this coupling, and of this revelation if he were still alive.

*Tenrai would break forth from the grave in a state of unbridled fury if he knew.* The thought elated him.

He remembered how Tenrai once came to him, begging that he revive this priestess. Unfortunately, as with so many others lost that day, Hakai wasn't able to as her body was damaged beyond repair. There were no healers among them who could reconstruct the



woman's gutted heart. Therefore, if she were called back from the dead, she'd once again perish due to her fatal injury.

When that didn't work, the priest instead groveled for his assistance in finding her reincarnation. He also remembered how Renji actively participated in looking for her as well. At least, he had the sense to give up, eventually focusing his efforts into leading one united tribe.

His wife's brother, well, that was another story entirely. Tenrai searched until he took his last dying breath.

"Earth to Hakai!"

The unbecoming exclamation shook him from his musings.

"How long are you going to stare off into space?"

This was most unlike him.

"Be careful how you address me, agent Wraith. Do not forget why it is that you are here," he warned.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why *am* I here?"

*Oh, yes. That.* He took a deep breath. "You are here because I wanted to speak to you about your recent investigation into Tsuki Industries' purchasing history."

\*\*\*

"Oh, what is it that you'd like to know?" Amari curiously asked.

"What were you looking for?"

"I'm sure you're aware of the emergence of Ultimate Soldiers?"

When Hakai remained silent, she thought, *Lord, this is going to be one hell of a night. Why must he be so difficult to talk to?*

She massaged her temples. "We've recently become aware of soldiers who are being controlled remotely by use of cybertronics made by your company. Because of this circuitry, they never stop fighting, nor are they able to stop moving even when their bodies are decimated. They're incredibly dangerous, and aren't able to control their actions."

He raised an eyebrow in apparent interest.

"I wanted to see if there were any new buyers of this hardware in the past year. I was trying to find a lead somewhere. To be honest, I glanced through the reports, but without the inclusion of prior years

for comparison, I really can't say if anything stands out," she said, becoming discouraged.

He remained statuesque.

"You really are terrible at having a conversation."

"We are not engaged in conversation at the moment. You are reporting your findings."

*Grrrrrrrrrr*. She frowned. "Is there a reason why all demons are so thoroughly infuriating?"

There was no response.

"*Anyway*, since this is *your* company, can you say offhand if you've had any new circuit buyers as of late? Have there been any significant changes in existing customer order volumes? Is there anything you can think of, at all, about any of this?"

Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he reached into his breast pocket, releasing the cell phone from within. He tapped on the device's screen a few times, before raising the phone to his ear.

"Lythe, I want you to have all our records in the technology sector, across all businesses, audited. Go as far back as the last ten years. Compile a report of *all* circuitry clients and their typical buying habits over this timeframe. I also want a report of buyers who purchase these products across all companies." He hung up, his eyes never dropping from hers.

*Lythe? That decrepit woman is still alive?*

"What can you tell me about your mission to Shanghai?" he aloofly said, interrupting her thoughts.

"The soldiers were solely focused on stealing the entire inventory on hand at the factory. They only engaged us when we interrupted them or went after the hostages who were with them."

"Hostages?"

"Yes, people held against their will by force."

"I am well aware of the definition of the word 'hostages,' agent Wraith. Where did these hostages come from? All the workers at the manufacturing plant are accounted for, and I am not aware of any Chinese civilians going missing as a result of the raid on the factory."

"From the footage collected from your security cameras, the soldiers brought the hostages in with them."

"Why would they bring outside hostages with them to steal hardware?"

"Bargaining power or, maybe, a way to negotiate an escape? I don't really know. Wherever you find Ultimate Soldiers, you'll always find spooky hostages."

"Always?"

"Yes, in every instance so far."

"Where are these hostages now?"

"Fifteen are on my base, either in the care of the Interrogation Department or the Medical Research Department."

"Could these people be voluntarily working with the soldiers?"

"It doesn't seem that way. They have always looked filthy, undernourished, and abused. The first time I encountered these soldiers, we had a bad experience with one of these hostages. She was a psychic, and she mentally assaulted me, and a colleague of mine named Mystic. Mystic also happened to be a psychic, and she told me the woman's psyche was completely shattered from trauma. We assumed she was tortured," she answered.

*Come to think about it...*

"There was another psychic hostage in Shanghai, and we had a similar experience. This one fully took over Mystic's mind and made her shoot two of her teammates."

His voice became stern. "These people certainly do not sound like hostages, especially if they are attacking you. Has *ROOT* investigated the identities of these so-called hostages?"

"They're simply missing people from across the world."

"Are you aware of the rarity of psychic type powers, agent Wraith?"

"No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me," she muttered.

Hakai's eye involuntarily twitched. "Psychic beings account for less than five percent of the world's population. The fact that you discovered several alongside these soldiers doesn't sound like a coincidence. The backgrounds of all of the hostages you recovered should be thoroughly investigated."

"What could the connection be between psychic hostages, circuits, and Ultimate Soldiers?"

"The psychics are using the circuits to assist them in controlling the soldier's bodies," he simply said.

A flood of connections quickly formed in her mind.

She remembered how hell-bent Mystic was on 'saving' the hostage who'd touched her, and how his control over her dissipated right after she'd killed him. She remembered that some of the soldiers in Shanghai stopped moving after the death of the hostage Quake killed.

"But this doesn't explain why they'd be able to control Mystic's mind. She certainly doesn't have any circuitry embedded in her body. How would that have been possible?" she wondered, confused.

"The psychic mind cannot be compared to the mind of non-psychic beings, Wraith. They use sections of their brains others do not. They can sense and understand things others simply cannot. Consider their minds to be a widely open door. It would be incredibly easy for one psychic to connect to another. Whereas, it'd be much more difficult for them to fully take over a non-psychic mind without a certain level of permission, training, or help. Apparently, they found a way to work around that recently, hence, the need for my circuits."

"How do you know all of this?"

"I have been around for a very long time, and I have learned quite a bit throughout my life. I've also studied the multitude of various 'gifts' *ROOT* has at its command. The Intelligence Department's information on psychics has become quite astounding over the years," he thoughtfully said.

*How could I have possibly missed all of this? We've been going after the wrong target this entire time. The soldiers aren't the enemy, the hostages are.*

She'd been so distracted by the issues within her team and in her romantic life as of late, that she completely missed such an uncomplicated connection.

"We have a huge problem then." She fumbled to pull out her phone. "We've gone about handling them the wrong way..." she trailed off, as she hurriedly dialed Hush.

The General picked up on the very first ring.

"General, we have a massive situation on our hands! I need your full attention." She paused for a moment before continuing. "I'm with our mutual friend right now, and I believe he's figured out the

Ultimate Soldier mystery. It's very likely the people we have, up until this point, considered being hostages are really our enemies. It's also highly probable that all of the people we have in our care right now are psychics, and they've been using circuitry to enhance their ability to control the bodies of those soldiers. Please have the hostages scanned for circuitry to confirm this."

She worriedly listened to Hush's voice on the other end of the phone.

"There's more to it, Hush! With the first hostage, Ellie Swift, Mystic, and I gave orders that she should be treated as hostile. Based on this classification, we instructed the Interrogation and Medical Research Departments to only use other psychics when working with her. I have just come to find out psychics should be the last people allowed to go near these hostages. Apparently, some psychics can take over the bodies of other psychics without the use of circuitry," she informed him, her voice on edge. "Please track down all of the psychics who have come in contact with any of these hostages and quarantine them, by force if you have to."

She briefly worried about Mystic's wellbeing as she searched Hakai's face in worry.

"Understood. I'll be with our friend in the meantime. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there's any trouble." Amari hung up the phone, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

"You are worried," he whispered.

"Yes," she confided. "We have quite a few of them on base."

"A possible Trojan horse scenario?"

"I really hope not."

## Chapter 22

Renji sniffed the air on the rooftop of the Ryunique restaurant in Seoul. His mate was close.

He'd initially lost her.

He couldn't take his car in case anyone became suspicious of his absence from the base - it would be a dead giveaway. So, instead, he set out on foot. But, because Amari left by car, he lost all trace of her scent within five minutes.

Becoming discouraged, and frantic, he went back home to do something unforgivable.

Putting his reconnaissance skills to use, he fired up her laptop. He wasn't able to log into her *ROOT* account as it required a password, a fingerprint, and a retinal scan. But, he did know the password she used to log into her personal accounts and prayed she left some information behind about where she was going.

He struck gold when he found her Google search history.

*"Dress code for Ryunique restaurant in Seoul."*

It was the simplest thing to do, but the gravity of it made him sick to his stomach. In spite of it, he felt compelled to set forth again. But this time, he had an address in hand.

He ran at an incredible speed under the cover of darkness to get to her. With every mile he passed, with every step he put between himself and the base, he oddly felt his anxiety slip away. As he now stood on the rooftop, he felt calm and at peace. It was as though someone flipped a switch.

He frantically tried to understand why he was behaving this way. His previous instincts were roaring that something was wrong, that there was danger. But, he didn't know if it was the result of unbalanced mating hormones or an actual threat.

But now, on this rooftop, he felt... normal.

*I'm really losing my fucking mind.*

A now levelheaded Renji had a monumental decision to make. He could enter the building and try to shadow Amari, or he could return home and leave her be.

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"Did you and Tenrai get along after you married his sister?" Wraith innocently asked as she finished her dinner.

"We became somewhat civil over the years," Hakai acknowledged. "He officiated my wedding, actually."

"No way! That's awesome!" She giggled. "I wish I was a fly on the wall just to see how that request went down."

He almost cracked a smile. "It was more of an uncomfortable argument than a request."

"I'll bet. It probably ended with an epic battle," she joked as her eyes twinkled.

"It actually did." This time he actually did smile at the memory and treated his beautiful companion to the sight of his slender and pearly white, fanged canine teeth.

"Wine agrees with you," she happily said.

"I could reply with the same, Miss Wraith. You appear to be much less jaded when you drink."

"I'm not jaded! I'm charming! I just happen to keep bad company." She pointed to him and chuckled.

"That would certainly explain why you've taken *that* obnoxious wolf demon as your mate," he retorted.

"Hey! He's not obnoxious! He's just..." She frowned. "An insecure and overwhelmingly suffocating pain in the ass sometimes!"

*Renji is insecure and suffocating?* This was certainly interesting. From what he remembered, the alpha was overly confident, especially when it came to women. "This is standard mated wolf demon behavior, is it not?"

"Not at this level. Mated wolf demons can keep their possessive and protective instincts at bay due to exposure to their partner's pheromones."

"And you are not a wolf demon," he concluded, picturing the level of damage control she must be putting up with daily.

"I'm hoping that, scientifically, we may be able to find a solution for the scent issue," she sadly said. "Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, you may not be able to stay with him?" he wondered, calibrating her level of devotion to the man.

"No! Otherwise, we're going to have to start back at square one and figure something else out," she said, clearly frustrated. "I would

never give up on him. I trust him. I love him. My very soul literally lives within him! But, his instinctual behavior is getting very hard to deal with lately... for everyone. So, I'm hoping we can find a solution sooner rather than later. That's all." Her posture drooped slightly, mirroring the weight of her situation.

Hakai found himself hoping it worked out for her. He concluded he genuinely liked her and wanted her to be happy.

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"Is this type of behavior similar to dog demons?" Amari abruptly asked.

Hakai turned his nose up in the air. "Dog demons do not *mate*, we breed," he condescendingly said. "We also do not cover each other in repugnant scents to claim one another either," he said, his voice becoming disgusted.

Back in her past life as Risa, dog demons were infamous for the level of infidelity between one another. However, this natural behavior didn't hold true if the partner was human. They seemed to really love humans for some odd reason.

"Geez. Sorry, I asked. I was just trying to figure out if you might be able to help me somehow," she defensively bit out.

"Humph."

"So, why did you really want to meet with me if you didn't remember who I was?" she brazenly asked, taking advantage of the now flowing conversation.

"I wanted to know what you were looking for—"

"That's bullshit, though, isn't it? It was because I looked like *her*, wasn't it?" she said, her voice becoming soft and sympathetic.

He didn't respond.

"It's okay. I truly understand. There's no shame in it."

"Ridiculous."

"I'd have done the same. I'm not very good with loss, either."

"Maybe, you should cease drinking."

"How'd she die?" she cautiously asked.

"Agent Wraith—"



"I cared about her, too. And please, call me Amari right now." Sadness was now prominent in her tone.

The ancient dog demon studied her, his head slightly tilting in his serious review of her face. "She was in Hiroshima when the American bomb hit."

*Huh? That happened in... 1945?* She shook her head. She wasn't drunk by any stretch of the imagination, not even tipsy actually, but the math just wasn't adding up. "How's that possible? That would've made her—"

"Over four hundred years old at the time," he finished for her.

"But, Kichi was human." She remembered the small orphan who came to live at her temple with her brother. The girl wasn't even a holy user. She had no powers whatsoever.

"Yes, she was... Amari," he confirmed, trying her real name on for size.

"So, how's that possible?"

A ghost of a frown now traced his lips. "I found a way to keep her with me. A gift," he whispered. "However, this particular endowment did not protect against atomic explosives."

"I'm so very sorry."

Before he could speak again, the ringing of Amari's phone interrupted him.

She reached for it. "Please excuse me."

He nodded.

"Agent Wraith."

Her eyes flew up to Hakai's as she listened to the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Have Demise come to get me, and I'll be right there. I'm unarmed, so I'll need time to suit up. Give me an hour." She hung up the phone.

"Problem?"

"Yes, remember the potential situation we discussed about the base?"

He nodded.

"I believe it may be happening," she nervously advised.

"Then, you must go."

\*\*\*

As Hakai walked Amari to the door, he actually felt lighter. He found he enjoyed reminiscing with her, as well as arguing with her, and it was something he wanted to do again very soon.

"If anything goes wrong, I want you to contact me." He helped her into her coat.

"How would I get in touch with you?"

"My people will provide you with my contact information within the hour. My information changes every few weeks, so you will continue to be updated going forward."

"That must be annoying."

"It is necessary."

"Thank you for tonight. I actually had a lot of fun," she honestly said. "Let's do it again sometime!"

He nodded as he opened the door for her, escorting her outside. The moment the open air hit him, a familiar and disgusting scent flooded his nose. His brows furrowed slightly as he deeply sniffed the air.

"Did you tell anyone about our meeting tonight?" he demanded.

"Not a soul. Only the General knows."

"Then, would you mind clarifying exactly what *he* is doing up there?" His head tilted skyward, swaying as he visually tracked the quick movements of the body in motion.

Amari followed the direction of his slitted pupils and was able to briefly make out a figure as it jumped rooftop-to-rooftop, away from them.

"Who?"

"Renji!" he roared.

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The sound of the name boomed across the streets, its echo quickly halting the figure up above. Amari couldn't clearly make it out, but the shadow seemed to turn, looking down in their direction.

*He didn't!* Rage exploded through her. *He promised me. He swore to me.*

Launching her tracking powers, her spiritual fury brightly lit Renji up like a Christmas tree. He was too far away for her to see his face, but according to his posture, he appeared to be dumbly staring down at them.

"I swear I didn't tell him. He must have followed me here," she seethed through clenched teeth. "I told him that if he tried anything I'd tell Hush personally, and he'd be dismissed from the organization. He promised me he wouldn't."

\*\*\*

*Renji is an agent as well? Now, that is most interesting,* Hakai mused while barely suppressing a smirk.

"Quite the loyal one," he lowly said, fully instigating, as he looked up at the figure above.

He was genuinely enjoying this.

He and Renji crossed paths only a handful of times over the centuries, and for the most part, they ignored each other each time that they did. However, he had long detested the abhorrent and arrogant wolf demon.

It was at this moment that Amari's ride pulled up to the restaurant.

He opened the car door for her. "Will, you truly tell Hush?"

She didn't answer, and he instead watched as she cut her spiritual connection, and Renji faded back into the darkness above.

"I leave that decision at your discretion," he said in a whisper. "I didn't see anything."

A slight smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he walked back to the entrance of the restaurant. Before he opened the door, he stopped and called over to her from across his shoulder.

"Agent Wraith?"

She turned to look at him.

"Do try not to kill him."

\*\*\*

*This isn't fucking happening right now!* Renji looked down at a furious Amari, and a *smirking* Hakai, that stood down below.

*He scented me. That's how he made me. God damn dog demons!*

He *had* decided to leave. He *had* pulled himself away and was going home. He did the right thing. Granted, it was the *only* right thing he did this evening, but it was still one major decision he was able to say had indeed been correct.

He stupidly froze at the sound of his real name roaring up at him from the street below. When his body then exploded into an enormous blaze of blue light, he knew the jig was up.

Amari was never going to forgive him for this, and the knowledge made him thoroughly ill.

*She will leave me this time. There's no way around it. I betrayed her trust. I knowingly lied to her.*

His heart was slamming in his chest. He had never been so afraid in his entire life. In his reality, the very definition of life required Amari to be in it.

*Yet I can't stop fucking up!*

He honestly believed she was in danger. Sure, he felt possessiveness over her appearance tonight. But, it was the sense that something terrible was going to happen to her that drove him off the base and to her side. The knowledge was purely instinctual. But, once he finally got to the restaurant, the foreboding feeling disappeared.

He didn't trust his own mind or body anymore, and he honestly was beginning to feel as though he were really going crazy.

He sadly watched as Amari got into Demise's car. Her eyes were downcast and stayed that way even after they drove off.

He found he might've actually felt a little better if she started screaming or shooting at him with her arrows. But, the way she was quietly leaving him behind, left him teetering on hysterics.

As Demise sped off, he broke out in a run.

He hoped he'd be able to get to Amari before she made it back to their apartment. Somehow, he needed to find a way to explain himself. He just prayed she would understand. But, the painful knot in his stomach didn't seem to agree.

As he ran across the rooftops, acrobatically jumping and flipping, he briefly wondered why she was with Hakai. That condescending fuck really got under his skin.

*She was on a mission tonight. Maybe he's a mark?*

Out of everyone he'd met in his long life, Hakai was the most likely to try to take over the world in some way. From what he remembered, the man hated humans and had some serious mommy issues. Becoming the biggest and baddest demon was once his entire life's motivation. He was pretty full of himself, as well.

*Maybe ROOT is using Amari's past as a way to get close to him?*

It was highly probable. The only thing bothering him about their meeting tonight was that the man happened to look like a God damned fallen angel, disgustingly beautiful and just as powerful. Knowing their history together, they certainly would've discussed Tenrai tonight as well. And that was the last person he wanted on her mind, especially not after he fucked up so royally tonight.

*Tenrai wouldn't have lied to her. He never would have betrayed her in any way, his mind lectured.*

The truth of the statement had him gritting his teeth.

## Chapter 23

Of the multitude of emotions Amari was feeling, she couldn't determine which was the most devastating. She felt hurt and furious, but more so than anything else, she felt utterly betrayed.

She could no longer trust Renji.

The realization left a dark emptiness in its wake, one she didn't know if she would ever be able to again fill.

Everything that they'd been through and all the challenges they faced was always worth it to her. *Renji* was always worth fighting for. But tonight, his actions truly spoke to how much *he* valued their relationship.

She wasn't worth fighting for... to him.

There was no demonic bloodlust to blame today. No black aura, no red eyes, no claws, or fanged teeth. He was entirely coherent when he made her that promise tonight. A promise made when golden eyes weren't able to meet hers.

Knowing he'd be faced with discharge if he were found out, he still decided to leave the base and follow her. Knowing he could harm her career, the very career she'd worked so hard for, had apparently not even been the slightest of concerns for him.

Tonight he decidedly threw their relationship away, threw his career with *ROOT* and Alpha Team away, and threw her trust away... as if they were nothing more than garbage.

Since finding him again, she did nothing but fight for him, and he'd done nothing but fight against her every step of the way.

She felt like a complete fool.

*I have to tell Hush. I can't keep protecting him and making excuses. Renji can go back to Japan and go back to some semblance of his old life. He can enjoy his freedom, his numerous homes, and his many cars. He can enjoy his countless whores and his solitude again. Obviously, that's what's most important to him.*

Tears welled up into her eyes. *Don't lie to yourself. You aren't going to tell Hush a thing*, her mind chided.

*Shut up!* she internally seethed.

"Is everything alright, Wraith?" Demise eyed her from the driver's seat.

"No, this time, it's really not."

"Would you like to talk about it? Did that man back there do something to you?" she asked as her voice became deadly.

"No, that's not it at all. That man gave me a much-needed escape tonight, a few hours of normalcy and peace. And for that, I'm truly grateful."

"So, what's wrong, then?"

"I'm going to lose someone today," she said through clenched teeth. "And loss really isn't my specialty."

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When the two women arrived at the base, both noticed the number of guards who now littered the entrance.

Demise showed one of the armed agents her credentials and proceeded through the gates. "What's going on?"

"There's a standoff situation happening between some of the agents from the Interrogation Department. The General said he'd wait for me in the main lobby of the office building. I just need to stop by my apartment, so I can suit up. I should be able to meet him in fifteen minutes."

"Oh, my." She pulled into her assigned parking space. "Do be careful, agent Wraith."

"I will. Please go home now, and thank you for the ride." She exited the car, removed her heels, and broke out into a heated run toward the housing suites.

Making it to her apartment in record time, she purposefully trained her eyes on the floor as she ran to her closet, avoiding the many pictures of her and Renji scattered throughout the house.

Quickly stripping off her dress, she replaced it with her tactical clothing and Teflon armor. She just finished arming when she heard her front door's locking mechanism click.

*God damn it! Stay the fuck away from me! I have to meet Hush right now! There's a massive problem on base, and I don't have time to hear your stupid excuses!* she seethed, downright furious.

She then did something genuinely malevolent. She called forth her purification powers and watched as her body was set ablaze by a white, holy glow.

Her goal, when she stomped over to her entrance, was to force Renji back, away from the door and away from her.

Only it wasn't Renji on the other side of the door, and the loud clicking sound she heard wasn't the lock.

To make matters worse, she'd forgotten a very valuable lesson. The very lesson she once died learning.

It was impossible to use shielding powers and purification powers at the same time.

The hollow tip armor-piercing bullets easily drilled through her apartment's door as they were released from the high power automatic rifle on the other side. Fifteen rounds were in one clip, and fifteen rounds made their way into, and through her body, forcing her down onto the floor. Her Teflon armor wasn't much of a match for the kind of firepower aimed at it from such close range.

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A petite shooter with long, silver hair peered through the large gaping holes adorning Wraith's door, watching the fallen agent as she sputtered and twitched on the other side.

Ellie looked on from Mystic's body as two tears fell from the corners of agent Wraith's eyes, rolling down her blood-stained cheeks while she blindly reached her hand out for help.

Help that would never come.

It was only a few more seconds before she stopped blinking, her eyes wide as they blankly stared at the ceiling.

Turning away from the macabre scene, Ellie now headed for the stairwell. She wanted to get Mystic as far away from the sight as possible.

The agents here apparently became wise to what she'd been up to, thanks to agent Wraith's meddling. Now, her multitudes of host bodies were being taken away from her. She just couldn't allow that to happen before she was able to get her real body out of there.

When *ROOT* agents tried to forcibly imprison one of her main bodies under the orders of General Hush and agent Wraith, she engaged them. Vigor was a master psychic who specialized in telekinesis. His powers were more than enough to allow her to push



her way out of the Interrogation Department's main floor, quickly throwing aside her potential capturer's bodies as she did.

But then they'd called in reinforcements, a substantial amount of them, and she found herself up against too many different powers at the same time. An agent with teleportation abilities easily managed to get behind her and electrocute her with a stun rod.

She barely managed to jump out of Vigor's consciousness and into Mystic's before he passed out.

Ellie knew full well that agents would soon be coming to imprison Mystic too. But her body offered an opportunity to take care of one huge problem, and she had to take the chance.

Mystic lived in the same building as Wraith.

Mystic was in bed sleeping when Ellie entered her body. And she briefly celebrated her luck in finding that she was free before she made the woman get out of bed, and go to her weapon closet. She then made her take her most potent weapon from the shelving and lie in wait on Wraith's floor.

Ellie wasn't sure how much agent Wraith figured out, nor did she care. There was just too much at stake right now to allow her to live.

Ellie's organization had been spying on *ROOT* for years. However, agent Wraith brought an end to that form of espionage months ago and brilliantly managed to flush all of the dirty agents out. As a result, her group needed to find a different way to get back in, and here she was, doing just that under the guise of a troubled hostage in need of help.

The plan worked, and Ellie succeeded in her infiltration mission. During her weeks on the base, she amassed a wealth of knowledge about the organization and the agents from within. She just had to find a way to communicate all of her gathered information back to her own organization, *HAVOC*.

But apparently, Wraith caught on before she was able to figure out how.

The Alpha Team leader continued to be a significant threat to *HAVOC's* plans, and, this time, the woman just had to go.

Ellie actually did feel a small amount of remorse for using Mystic to kill the woman. Mystic genuinely cared about Ellie and

her wellbeing. She picked up on the sentiments a few times over the past few weeks when she'd jumped in to visit her.

As a reward, she prevented her from witnessing her friend's death.

When Ellie finally reached the very bottom of the stairwell on the basement floor, she gently tucked Mystic's body away behind the stairs and put her back into a state of deep sleep. She then left the woman's consciousness to jump around yet again, hoping to find someone closer to her actual body.

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By the time Renji finally got back to the base, he was covered in sweat. At the halfway point of his trek, the feeling of foreboding returned, and the closer he got to home, the more overwhelming it became. There were several times the sheer fear burning through him almost released his inner beast from within.

He'd been fighting with everything he had to keep some semblance of control so he could get back in time to find Amari.

*She's in danger!*

His hands shook, and his breathing was ragged. Attempting to calm, he tried to understand why there was such a heavy presence of agents now guarding the base's entrance.

*How the hell am I supposed to get in?*

He spent several seconds trying to come up with a plan. But, any form of thinking at this point was absolutely impossible with the loud growling rumbling through his brain and the high level of adrenaline burning through his veins.

*Fuck it. I have to get to Amari. If it's found out that I left the base tonight, then so be it.* He found he didn't care anymore. He didn't know why, but he knew he needed to get to her immediately. It was as if her very life depended on it. He didn't have time for anything else.

Approaching the entrance, he handed his credentials to one of the agents, and thanked a higher power when they didn't give him any trouble and allowed him in.

*Thank God!* He instantly locked onto his mate's scent.

He was about to set off in her direction when a paralyzing bolt of electricity shot up his spine. The gut-wrenching feeling was followed by a bitter and sweeping coldness that knocked him down to his knees, freezing his muscles and chattering his teeth. He struggled to catch his breath before pushing forward through sheer willpower alone.

He took off in a run, moving so fast he became a blur, the wind kicking up around him as he tracked Amari to their apartment building. He didn't have time for the elevator, so he took the stairs instead.

Under any other circumstances, he would have found Mystic's scent along with the overpowering smell of gunpowder in the stairwell to be extremely suspicious. But at the moment, the finding was unimportant, and Renji didn't hesitate to charge up to the eighth floor.

When he finally burst onto his floor, he was halted in his tracks, this time, by a scent that set his inner beast into a complete state of utter panic.

*Blood.*

And not just any blood. This was Amari's blood. And there was a lot of it.

The meaning behind the finding was obvious, and he instantly knew.

Deep in his bones, *he knew*.

He knew before he got to their door, and he knew when he collapsed at her side.

He had lost her.

He couldn't bring himself to say the words, but he knew Amari, *his Amari*, wasn't of this world anymore.

Her eyes were unfocused as they stared unblinkingly at the ceiling above. She was lying in a pool of thickening blood. Large holes littered her body, and she was bathed in a pool of the sticky red substance, unmoving and cold.

He'd been too late.

A thick, black, and deadly aura engulfed him as he gently pulled her body into his arms, holding her tightly and rocking her as he buried his face in her bloodied hair. His clawed hands coasted over

her cheek with utmost care while his tears washed over her, bathing her in his grief.

"You can't leave me, baby. Please, Amari. Please! I love you too damn much. I just found you again," he pleaded in a low growl, his devastation echoing through his demonic voice. "You can't do this. I need you. I can't do this without you. Please come back to me. You have to come back."

*I didn't protect her.*

He found himself wondering if any of this could be real. He wanted the nightmare he was in to be over, but he couldn't seem to wake up.

Time stilled as he stayed this way, protecting what was left of her. He wasn't aware of the multitude of agents swarming the building or his apartment, or of anything else for that matter.

All that existed was her.

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"Where the hell is she?" The General watched as Vigor's unconscious form was carried through the lobby and off to the basement prison cells below.

Out of patience, he pulled out his cell phone and called his secretary. "Demise, are you having trouble getting Wraith to the base?" he shouted, becoming very pissed off. "Where are you?"

There was a brief pause before she replied.

"Sir, I dropped her off over thirty minutes ago. She should've been there by now. She told me she was going to suit up and meet you in the lobby."

His heart filled with dread. "Thank you." He disconnected the line and dialed another number, becoming impatient when the phone rang more than once.

"Agent Frisk."

"Frisk, get your ass over to Wraith's apartment immediately. If she's not there, find her. Something's very wrong."

"Understood."

\*\*\*

"Fang? Fang, it's time. It's been hours, and we're going to need her... body now," Frisk whispered, his voice cracking as he fought to choke down tears.

Four hours ago, he arrived at Wraith and Fang's apartment, along with a flurry of additional agents. When he walked inside, it became painfully evident that a medical crew wouldn't be necessary.

He nearly collapsed when seeing the condition Wraith was in. He wasn't prepared for... *this* when he arrived here. When the initial shock wore off, he called the General to report the situation.

Hush didn't interrupt him or say one word when he told him Wraith had been shot and succumbed to her injuries. He merely listened to the report and hung up when he was done.

That was hours ago.

Since then, he and several other agents watched Fang grieve over her body. He was in full bloodlust form, and they were taking every precaution with him. All agents were armed with massive amounts of tranquilizers.

However, so far, he seemed to be completely unaware of their presence. It was heartbreaking for everyone to watch him as he hummed to, rocked, and nuzzled the dead body of the woman he so desperately loved.

It was even harder for Frisk to hold back in this situation and not throw his own arms around Wraith as well.

Because he was afraid to rattle Fang in any way, he ordered that everyone stand back and let him say goodbye. But, he couldn't let it continue for very much longer. Wraith needed to be taken care of. Her body was clearly going into rigor mortis.

Fang slowly lifted his eyes as Frisk spoke, tilting his head slightly as if noticing him for the first time.

"Can you hear me? We need to take care of her. We need to clean her up. We can't leave her like this. Do you understand?" he pleaded in a low whisper. "Please, let us care for her."

The wolf demon's brows furrowed as he studied him with glowing, crimson eyes.

He was trying his best to swallow the terror rising up in his body as he met the cold stare head-on. "Can you carry her? Keep her safe?" He once again fought back tears. "Look at her. She's dirty. Will you help carry her so we can clean her up?"

He let go of the breath he didn't know he was holding when Fang slowly stood, gently carrying her securely in his arms. *Thank fucking God.*

"Thank you. I won't let anything happen to her, I promise. Let's take her over to Medical Research and get her cleaned up." He turned to exit the apartment with Fang closely following behind him.

Several agents fell in step behind them, their guns aimed at Fang.

He suspected they might have a significant problem once they got to the autopsy suite. *His contact with her is most likely what's keeping him from going absolutely berserk. Once he lets her go, and the reality sets in, there may be no way to control him.*

Pulling out his phone, he sent a quick message to the agents behind him.

*"Once we get into the big freezer, and on my signal, pump him full of those sedatives and don't hold back. Fang will never willingly let Wraith go."*

## Chapter 24

When Amari opened her eyes, she was greeted by the beautiful warmth of the sun as it shone high above. She'd been having the strangest dream, yet she wasn't able to recall any of it.

*Where am I?*

She sat up and scanned the lush countryside around her. Her surroundings were unfamiliar, yet she didn't feel apprehensive, she felt oddly at peace.

"It's about time. I feel like I've been waiting forever," a rough and familiar voice called out from behind her.

Standing, she looked in the direction of the voice. And she felt all the breath leave her lungs as she looked at a face she never thought she'd see again.

Tenrai smiled at her, his mix-matched eyes sparkling from his seated place beneath a blooming tree. Pink cherry blossoms littered the ground beneath him, and the wind gently picked up, swirling the soft petals around him.

"I'd love to ask what took you so long, but come to think about it, you got back here pretty quickly. What happened to you?" he grumpily asked. However, his broad smile betrayed the harshness of his words.

Quickly getting to his feet, he ran over and took her into a bone-crunching hug.

"How?" she sputtered, not understanding. "Is this a dream?"

"Something like that. But, the kind you actually want to be in for the rest of eternity. Although it does get pretty boring around here."

Gently pushing away from him, she allowed some space to look at him. "You aren't real." She apprehensively touched his short brown hair.

He huffed. "I'm *very* real. I've been waiting for you, Risa." His voice became soft as he took her hand from his hair and placed it on his cheek. "So, *this* is your new form?" He looked her over, brushing her hair away from her face.

"I don't understand." She searched his eyes. "Renji told me you died a long time ago."

At the sound of the wolf demon's name, he scowled. "Keh. What would that moron know about it?" he grumbled, clearly becoming agitated.

"So, you're really alive, then?" she hopefully asked. "You're really here?"

He diverted his eyes. "I'm really here, but I'm not alive," he softly said. "The same is true of you."

A brief tickle of panic crawled inside her body before it quickly disappeared. "What do you mean? Where are we?"

"For most, this is eternity," he started. "But for us holy users, it's more like a temporary respite, a place of rest until we're reborn. This is a sacred place where we can finally be together. Yuri and Shinji, and so many others are here, too." He smiled. "I just wanted to meet you first. I can take you to them. Everyone's been waiting."

*Temporary... eternity?*

"I died?" she sputtered, interrupting the shared moment between them. "What happened to me?"

"Does it really matter? Who cares? You're here now. We can finally be together again," he sweetly whispered. "Just like we were before you were called back to the living world."

"Called back?"

Tenrai sighed. "Yes, before you were called back to start over. But, you wouldn't remember that, would you?" he muttered. "We only remember our most recent past life when we're reborn. We never seem to remember the time we spend in this place between lives, do we?" He shook his head.

"What?"

"We were together here. We found each other here after I died. But then... you were taken away from me again, Risa," he sadly said as his serious eyes searched hers.

"Not, Risa. *Amari*," she snapped. "*My name* is Amari." An image of Renji's seductive fanged smile and mischievous golden eyes appeared in her mind. *Renji...*

"I'm not supposed to be here!" she suddenly shouted, forcefully breaking the hug and stumbling back. "This isn't right. None of this is right!"



"Ri..." Tenrai hesitated. "Ah. Amari, I know it's scary at first, and it takes some getting used to, but you have to trust me, you're exactly where you're supposed to be. It's pretty nice here."

"No! I can't stay here. I have to get back. This can't be happening... this isn't real!" Her hands flew up to massage her temples.

"How stupid could you be?" he grumbled. "Are you happy to see me *at all*? Do you have any idea how long I've waited for you?" he spat, losing his patience. "*I'm* here. Doesn't that matter to you?"

*Same old temper.* She took a steadying breath. "It does matter, and *I am* happy to see you, it's just... this isn't the right time, and I'm not with *him*..."

She desperately tried to remember what happened before she woke up.

*I'd just suited up and heard Renji at the door?*

That didn't seem right.

*It wasn't Renji at the door. It was someone else. Someone that...*

She was drawing a blank. What was she doing before that?

*Fighting. She'd been fighting... with Renji?*

No, that wasn't it.

*I was mad. I was mad at Renji. He'd done something unforgivable, and I was...* She struggled to remember. *I was going to leave him. Renji betrayed me, and I was going to leave him.*

The recollection didn't seem to fit.

*He lied to me, and I lost my shit. I was going to threaten to leave him, punish him, make him suffer as he'd done to me... but I knew... I knew I was going to forgive him, and it made me furious... with myself... for being so weak. I let loose with my purification powers to force him away from the door, but he wasn't on the other side. The clicking sound was a rifle's magazine popping into place. Then Mystic shot me. She shot me so many times...*

"Oh my God!" she screamed, as the evening's memories flooded into her. "I really *am* dead!" Her arms flailed out, searching for something to hold on to.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" Tenrai crossed his arms over his chest.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she dropped to her knees. "Renji!" she roared, desperately seeking his presence.

"Renji?" He hissed. "Renji isn't here."

It was at this moment she began to sob.

"Amari! Please don't cry. I swear it's going to be alright!" He ran over and pulled her into his arms. "I promise you, everything is going to be alright."

"It's never going to be alright! He's not here!" she cried. "I was so angry with him. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"You're not making any sense," he gently said, not making the connection. "Who did you need to say goodbye to?"

"Renji!" she huffed, her voice becoming desperate.

"Don't worry about it. If he plays his cards right, you'll see him again someday. He'll be fine."

"You don't understand!" She pushed him away. "I'm in love with him!"

The priest's brows furrowed at the proclamation, finally understanding why she was so upset.

"You... have to be fucking kidding me! *Renji*? The same Renji that gave up so quickly on finding you? You can't be serious!" he roared. "When the *hell* did this happen?"

She punched the ground as hot tears streaked down her cheeks. "He's my mate. I don't belong here. I have to get back to him!"

"Your... *mate*?" he incredulously said. "You're *not* even a wolf demon!" he shouted. "This is fucking crazy! I've been waiting here for you for so long I can't even remember how many years have gone by. And, when you finally do get here, you don't even care about me at all. What's worse, the only thing you do seem to care about is..." he trailed off, not willing to say the name.

Taking a deep calming breath, she stood up and slowly made her way over to him. "I *have* missed you, and I *do* care that you're here. I still think about you all the time, you were my friend. You don't understand how many tears I've shed over you, over everyone. I've never come to terms with your loss."

The words seemed to comfort him, and his brown and green eyes began to search her blue ones. "I know this is hard. But I promise you, it'll get better," he vowed. "Come. Let's go see the others."

\*\*\*

Mystic woke in her building's stairwell to the sight of several guns aimed at her head. *Huh?*

"Agent Mystic, you're coming with us," a loud female voice shouted from above.

"What?" she mumbled. She didn't understand where she was or why she was there.

"You are now a prisoner and are being moved to the holding cells," the woman advised her.

Several hands flew down and hauled her to her feet.

"Prisoner? For what?"

"For the murder of your commander, Agent Wraith," the woman angrily bit out. She reached over and picked up the black AS50 gas action .50 BMG sniper rifle that was resting at her side.

"Murder? I don't understand!" Her voice was on edge. "Where am I? What happened to Wraith?"

The agents didn't answer; instead, they restrained her as they led her away.

*Answer me!* What happened to Wraith?"

"You killed her. Emptied an entire clip into her from this bad boy." The female shook the high-powered, lightweight weapon in her hand for effect.

"That's impossible! I would never! I was in bed, sleeping! I have no idea what's going on!" She closed her eyes and desperately tried to understand what was happening. As far as she knew, she'd been sleeping, dreaming of rescuing Quake from enemies on the battlefield. He was calling out to her for help.

In the dream, she shifted the high-powered rifle from her back and into her arms. She didn't hesitate to aim the powerful weapon and shoot the enemy targets in her battle to free her lover.

When all hostiles were dead, she rushed over to him, jumping into his arms in a firm hug. But, when she pulled away to kiss him, she remembered his eyes. Quake's pupils were wide and dilated as they looked down into hers.

The zombie-like stare was oddly familiar. It was very similar to someone she encountered before...

*Ellie. Ellie Swift.*

"Ellie!" she hollered. "Hostage Ellie Swift has been invading my mind! You need to find her and take her out!"

The female agent's brows furrowed, and she made no effort to release her.

"Please! You *have* to listen to me. That woman can jump inside my mind! Only, I haven't been aware she's been doing it!" She remembered the orders she'd once given to the Interrogation and Medical Research squads. "We've made a mistake. Other psychics came in contact with her, as well. She might be using them, too! You must listen to me!" she begged, becoming hysterical.

"We already know this," the woman grumbled. "That's why we were looking for you in the first place. Unfortunately, you weren't where you should've been, and it took us a little too long to find you. We were too late."

\*\*\*

Frisk studied Fang from across the metallic autopsy room table, fully prepared for the commotion he thought might happen next.

As expected, he seemed very hesitant to put Wraith down. Instead, he appeared to be studying the table with painful apprehension.

"You can wait here if you'd like. You'll be right next to her," he softly said. "Would that be alright?" He was trying his best to be gentle, hoping not to upset the furious beast standing before him. He'd learned the hard way that aggression wasn't the best tactic to use when dealing with Fang when he was in this state.

When the alpha didn't respond, he took to begging. "Fang, please. I need you to put her down."

Fang harshly swung his head over to him.

*Okay. Not a good move.* He counted to ten in his head. "Look, I know you don't want to hear this, but Wraith is—"

The demon flashed his teeth and growled, daring him to finish.

"Not with us anymore," he softly said. "She was my best friend. I cared about her, too." He cast his eyes to the floor. "Do you know who did this to her?" he asked, his voice now becoming angry.

Fang shook his head, his eyes never leaving their study of his face.

"Are you going to be able to put her down without tearing this place up?" he seriously asked, getting straight to it. "I'm going to track down the piece of shit that did this, and I'd like you to be with me when I do. I can't do that if you lose control," he honestly said. "Can you keep control?"

The wolf demon's expression contorted into one of absolute fury.

When the silence stretched out, Frisk sighed and shook his head. "Guess not."

He was about to give the signal for the agents behind him to shoot the sedative into Fang when the beast spoke.

"I want to find who did this to her." His voice was a menacing, evil echo.

*Fucking. Creepy.* "Then you have to behave. I'm trusting you here. Can you please put her down? As long as you can prove that you can control yourself, you'll be able to come back here to see her."

Fang turned his attention back to Wraith's face and lovingly placed a kiss on her forehead. He then gently lowered her onto the table and smoothed a few stray hairs away from her face with the utmost tenderness.

Frisk sadly watched him lovingly dote on her. "Out of all the gifted agents that exist, too bad none have the power to restore life."

For some reason, the words snapped Fang's attention back to him, his glowing, red eyes boring into his.

*Note to self. That was obviously the worst possible thing to say.*

"There is!"

"Huh?"

"There is one..." he trailed off, his eyes widening.

"No, there's not. Trust me. If there were, *ROOT* would be all over it. That's one power in this world that's impossible!"

"Call Hush. *Now!*" he snarled, snapping his fangs.

Frisk almost jumped out of his skin. "Why? What's going on?" he stammered. "Would you fucking talk to me for once?"

A wave of palpable fury flooded through Fang's body, and he visibly fought to restrain it. "The man she met with tonight on her mission! He has such a gift!"

"What mission?"

\*\*\*

Renji was beginning to lose his last shred of sanity.

"Hush sent her on a secret mission tonight. Ask him where we can find the man she was meeting with. Do it *now* before he gets away!"

Pulling his phone out, Frisk quickly dialed Hush's number. "General. I need your help. I've just become aware that the man agent Wraith met with tonight on her secret mission might be able to revive her. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

He couldn't make out what was being said on the other end of the line with the loud growling echoing in his head, but he didn't miss the way Frisk's face dropped as he listened to the response.

"If this guy could save her, why wouldn't you do it? Look at how much Wraith has given to this organization!"

He moved so fast no one in the room was able to track his movements. When they finally caught sight of him again, he had a hold of Frisk's cell phone.

"What the fuck? How did you..."

In the background, all agents quickly repositioned their guns over to his body.

"I know who that man was, Hush! We are... old friends. I need to know where I can find him. He's the only person alive who can save her!" Renji's eyes became slits as he listened to Hush's excuses on the other end of the line. A few seconds ticked by before he growled in frustration.

Throwing the phone at Frisk, he turned to leave the Autopsy room. "No one is to touch her until I get back! Is that understood?" he roared.

All the agents within, along with the present medical staff, nodded.

"Where are you going?" Frisk rushed to follow him out of the room.

"I'm going to find the leader of the dog demons," he growled, a small ray of hope finding its way into his heart. "Hopefully, he didn't get too far."

"Who?"

"Hakai. The person who can save Wraith."

He tried to remember the last time he saw the son-of-a-bitch with his mother's precious keepsake.

"Hakai." Frisk suddenly halted in his tracks, blinking a few times. He then briefly buried his head in his hands before running to catch up with him. "I'm coming too," he said, leaving no room for argument. "And I'll drive. You'd be really bad in a road rage situation right now."

Renji threw him a terrifying look.

## Chapter 25

Mystic was unceremoniously dumped inside one of the Interrogation Department's dark holding cells located in the basement of the office building.

Three walls of her room were comprised of cinder block while the fourth was made of high impact Plexiglass, allowing people on the outside to view the prisoners held within. The floor was cold and tiled, and the only items in the room were a mattress and a toilet.

Her mind was a flurry as she frantically tried to piece together everything to date.

Apparently, Ellie was visiting her. She wasn't sure when, or how often, but the undeniable truth was that she'd been using her for some time now. Most likely, everything started the moment they made contact back on Hashima Island, which was over a month ago.

And Ellie used her to kill Wraith.

That's what the agent who brought her here said. She didn't say that she hurt her or *tried* to kill her. The agent was very specific in using the word *murdered*.

*Wraith is dead, and I killed her.* A wave of grief and guilt washed over her, and the sheer weight of it was crushing her. *I almost killed two of my teammates in Shanghai, and now I actually killed Wraith.*

Hot tears fell from her eyes, and her body bowed from guilt.

*I can't even trust myself anymore. I'm hurting all of the people I love. How could I have allowed this to happen?* she seethed.

She never felt so low and helpless in all her life. In her desperation, she reached out to the one person who could possibly provide her with some comfort.

*Carlos? Are you there?*

*Yes, I'm here. What's wrong, Jacqueline?* Quake softly asked. *You sound upset. I hope you're not still worried about me. I told you everything is going to be okay. We'll be together again before you know it.*

*Baby, I did something terrible tonight. Only it wasn't me! That Ellie woman took over my body and killed Wraith!* she sobbed. *I have no memory of even doing it. I had no idea she was ever in my mind!*



*Wait. What?*

*Ellie took over my body and killed Wraith!* she repeated, utterly heartbroken.

*Wraith is dead?* he angrily rumbled. *Did you check to make sure?*

Mystic closed her eyes and concentrated on her friend.

Nothing happened.

*I can't connect to her, and I don't think it's because she's too far away,* she huffed.

He remained silent for a few moments. *Where are you?*

*I'm in one of the Interrogation Department's holding cells, in the basement,* she softly said. *Most likely, not too far away from the cell you're in.*

*How can other psychics so easily invade your mind?* he curiously asked. *You're a master psychic; shouldn't something like that be impossible?*

*Apparently, it's the opposite,* she said in frustration. *It seems to be pretty easy for others with similar powers to get in. I had no idea.*

*But didn't you put walls up in everyone's minds to protect them from this woman? What happened?*

She thought back, remembering how she erected walls into the minds of her teammates after Ellie invaded one of Wraith's dreams.

She'd gotten to everyone, hadn't she?

*Oh, no...*

*What is it?* Quake worriedly asked.

*I did. I got to everyone except... for myself. I never put up any walls within my own mind. It didn't even occur to me to do so. I didn't think I, a master psychic, would ever need to do such a thing.*

*Oh, Jacque,* he chided, his voice was grief-stricken.

*I fucked up...* She trailed off. *I completely fucked up, and because of it, I almost killed you and Terrain, and I killed Wraith!* she screamed into the mental connection. *I failed everyone! I'm worse than a killer!*

*You didn't know! This isn't your fault. There was no way you possibly could've known, baby! You can't blame yourself!*

*I could kill every agent here, and you'd still try to defend me. Just fucking stop! If you truly loved me, you wouldn't make excuses*

*for me all the time! I'm not this perfect angel on a pedestal you like to think I am!*

Quake sighed. *You aren't perfect. No one is perfect. You had no control over your actions, someone else did. You had no way of knowing this psycho was able to invade your mind. That isn't an excuse. It's a fact. You're a good person. Don't let this bitch make you think otherwise. You're letting her break you!* he yelled. *Stop the sniveling and self-pity. What happened to my warrior woman? You need to fight back!*

His ferocious words echoed in her consciousness. Thankfully, they had an effect.

Mystic scowled. *You're right. You're absolutely right.*

*I always am. Now let's come up with a plan before this chick manages to hurt anyone else. What do you know about her so far?*

*I know ROOT is quarantining the psychics that came in contact with her or the other hostages. They've apparently become wise to what's been going on.*

*That must mean it wasn't only you. There were others. Why would these people be doing this in the first place?* he wondered.

*I can only assume they're trying to hurt us... hurt ROOT in some way. There's no other possible explanation,* she guessed.

*So we must assume they're familiar with our secret organization, then. So, how would this be possible? The only people in this world that know about ROOT—*

*Are those that have worked for, or continue to work for, ROOT,* she finished.

*Former agents, then?*

*They have to be. Either these hostages were once agents here, or they're working for agents who are no longer with the organization.*

*If they were once agents here, our facial recognition software would've picked up on it immediately. Wraith told us Ellie was a missing person, the daughter of a British politician.*

*So they're in cahoots with former agents then. Using fresh faces to infiltrate was a way to work around our facial recognition capabilities,* she concluded.

*Okay, so we know what we're dealing with, then. Now let's try to figure out a way to stop them. This part is all you, baby.*

*Huh? I have no idea.*

*You're the psychic. How do you take down a psychic? I haven't a clue.*

Mystic's brows furrowed as she pondered this. *I guess it really depends. There are over thirty major classifications of psychics, and each one is very different.*

*Do you know what class Ellie would fall into?*

*Possession; she can take over the bodies of others by suppressing their consciousness, and Clairvoyance; specifically retrocognition, she can see past events that have been experienced in the host body's mind.*

*You're clairvoyant too,* he remembered.

*Yes, but my clairvoyance is specific to precognition. I see things in dreams sometimes before they happen. But, it's a feeble power. The only time I ever remember the dreams is when the foretold event is actually happening. It's not very helpful, and it's never come in handy before.*

*Can Ellie do anything else outside of these two categories?* he hurriedly asked.

*I have no idea. Those are the distinct two,* she dejectedly said.

*So, how would you take her down?*

*By shooting her!* she grumbled, losing her patience. *Shoot her, beat her, drown her... the usual stuff,* she spat before erupting into a fit of curses in Brazilian Portuguese.

*Watch the language. I'm only trying to help,* he softly said. *We're stuck in here and can't do any of those things. Is there something you can do as a psychic to bring her down?* his voice was now urgent. *You have to think, Jacqueline. This woman killed Wraith. You're the only one who can catch her!*

*I'm only one person, and I'm stuck in here! What the hell could I possibly do, Carlos?* she shouted, feeling hopeless.

*I'm only one person... stuck in here...* her mind repeated in her private thoughts.

Something clicked.

Taking a chance, she concentrated on the cells around her and tried to connect her consciousness with others.

*Is anyone out there? My name is Mystic, and I'm a member of the Reconnaissance Alpha Team. I'm a master psychic with*

*telepathic and clairvoyant capabilities. I'm imprisoned here because a false hostage named Ellie Swift has repeatedly taken over my mind and body and has used me to kill another agent. I need help!*

The silence stretched out for several minutes before a voice broke into her consciousness.

*My name is Vigor. I'm a master psychic in the Interrogation Department. I specialize in telekinesis and can move objects with my mind. I'm imprisoned here for the same reasons.*

*My name is Haze! a woman frantically called out. I'm a master psychic in the Interrogation Department, and I'm able to create illusions. I'm here because of Ellie as well.*

The responses seemed to encourage the others, as Mystic's consciousness exploded in hurried whispers made by different voices.

*My name is Verity. I'm with Interrogation and can tell if someone's telling the truth. I'm here for the same reasons.*

*My name is Pry! I'm also with Interrogation. I can hear the thoughts of the people around me! Thanks for pulling me in! It's much nicer to talk to everyone than listen to all of you worriedly ramble. It's been driving me nuts!*

*My name is Suggestion. I'm a medic with Medical Research. I'm able to hypnotize others. I treated Ellie when she first arrived on base.*

After Suggestion's proclamation, the voices went silent.

*Is that all of us? Is there anyone else?* she asked, becoming excited to be surrounded by so many of her own.

*Char is apparently missing, Vigor advised. She's the last one in my squad who worked with Ellie. She's a dangerous one, too. She specializes in Pyrokinesis and can set things on fire just by focusing her mind.*

*Did anyone else work with Ellie in Medical Research?* Mystic asked.

*No, just me,* Suggestion replied.

She noted how easy it was to connect with the other psychics around her. The shared hum between them was also calm and controlled; a true statement to the abilities of the people surrounding her. Unlike with non-psychics, these people needed no training to be

able to work within her telepathic connection; they had masterful control of their conscious and subconscious minds.

Taking a deep breath, she debriefed all the agents on the connection about everything she and Quake figured out about Ellie.

She also shared her story about how she first met Ellie, how another psychic made her hurt her teammates back in Shanghai, and how Ellie took over her body tonight to kill Wraith.

*What can we do? Verity asked. We're totally helpless. This woman can take any one of us over again at any time, and there's nothing we can do to stop her. We don't even know when she's doing it!*

*No, that can't be true. There are six of us here. Six master psychics. There has to be something we can collectively do to bring this evil woman down!* she said, finally regaining some of her confidence.

*What would you suggest? Vigor asked. If you have any ideas, I'd love to hear them! If that woman jumps back inside of me, no one would ever know. I could easily kill everyone down in this prison with my powers, too. So, if we could figure something out quickly, it'd be much appreciated.*

*That's not true. If we're all connected like this, those of us who are conscious will become aware of the new presence. Ellie wouldn't be able to hide!* she advised.

*If she can jump into our minds, then we should be able to jump into hers,* Pry huffed.

*Not really. The only one with telepathy in our little group is Mystic,* Suggestion advised.

*Hey Mystic, if you're able to connect to Ellie's mind, would you also be able to patch the rest of the psychics in to help you?* Quake curiously asked.

*Who are you?* Pry asked, confused by the new voice.

*I am agent Quake. I'm not a psychic. I'm just here for moral support,* he muttered. *I'm a member of the Reconnaissance Alpha Team.*

*I can! I can do that!* Mystic exclaimed.

*So let's come up with a plan then!* Haze shouted. *Let's make this bitch pay for what she did to us! Let's take the cunt down!*



## Chapter 26

The General stared at the phone in his hand. *Did that asshole just hang up on me?* He seethed as he pictured his fist landing squarely against agent Fang's jaw.

Hush *had* wanted to help him. He *had* wanted to help Wraith. But an order was an order.

*The identity of the founder is to be kept hidden at all costs.*

Hell, he didn't even know who the guy was. No one did. The first time he ever heard anything about, or from, their founder was today, and it was a specific request to meet with agent Wraith.

There was no way Fang could have known about her secret mission tonight unless she'd told him... or unless he'd followed her. And Wraith was a valuable, trustworthy agent, and *she wouldn't* directly disobey orders.

*However, Fang certainly would...*

The General ran a worried hand through his thinning hair.

*That motherfucker followed her, and even managed to get a look at the founder while he was at it! Damn it all to hell!*

Once again eyeing his cell phone, he quickly searched through his contacts.

*That's the last straw, Fang. You can kiss your employment with ROOT goodbye.*

He frantically searched for the contact information for the woman in their Human Resources group. Finally, finding the number, he was about to make the call before two sentences Fang said on their phone conversation echoed through his mind.

*"I know who that man was, Hush. We're... old friends."*

The General stared at his phone, unsure of what he should do. *If what the agent said was true, it could be very problematic for everyone.*

Frisk's words now replayed in his mind.

*"If he could save her, why wouldn't you do it, Hush?"*

*...why wouldn't you do it...*

A slow, burning pain coasted over his heart. He practically watched agent Wraith grow up within this organization, and he oddly thought of her as his own daughter. When Frisk informed him of her death, he honestly almost broke down and cried.

"Damn it all to hell!" He quickly searched his phone for a name he recently added to his contact listing.

*I'm getting too soft. Maybe it really is time I retire,* he thought as he found the new name and dialed the number.

"Miss, Lythe, this is General Hush. We have a situation and require your help."

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Hakai was on his way to the Incheon Airport that served Seoul when his phone rang. Noticing the caller was Lythe, he inwardly rolled his eyes before answering it.

He activated the line but didn't waste any time for a greeting. He instead, patiently waited for his most trusted attendant to begin rambling.

"Lord Hakai! I humbly apologize for having to interrupt you this evening. It appears as though those humans you keep around... as a hobby... are in need of your help. Their General directly contacted me. It was most offensive, I assure you. I was about to give him a piece of my mind, but he was most rude and didn't allow me the chance to speak—"

"What did he want?" he demanded, becoming impatient.

"I'm afraid something most terrible has happened to the woman you met with tonight."

*Something happened to Amari?*

A small tingle rushed over his heart, and he focused all of his attention on the call. "What happened? You have five seconds to enlighten me."

"She was killed. Another agent named Fang said he knew you and that you could help her. He went off to look for you!" she hurriedly said. When finished, she was left gasping for air.

Hanging up the phone, he addressed his driver. "Take me back to the restaurant at once."

He was well aware of who agent 'Fang' was. The moment he left Ryunique, he accessed *ROOT's* employee database. All he had to do was type 'wolf demon' into his search description, and Renji's case file, along with his photo, quickly popped up.

*A most unimaginative name, indeed,* he scoffed.



The picture was just as ridiculous as the name. Renji obviously posed in such a way to appear seductive. Either that or he was purposefully trying to woo the woman on the other end of the camera.

Hakai was awestruck by Amari's abhorrent taste in men.

*Amari...*

He wondered what happened to her. As he absorbed the news of her death, a small piece of the warmth she'd worked into his heart earlier sadly disappeared. He found he was angry that he would never be afforded the chance to be in her presence again, and he felt offended by the revelation.

*What could Renji possibly want from me?*

He had a small feeling he already knew.

If he was looking for him to use the Anamnesis Terrene to revive Amari, then he was going to be left massively disappointed. That jewel didn't work anymore. It hadn't since the day Kichi died.

The situation was most unfortunate. However, there wasn't anything he could do.

\*\*\*

"How do you know this guy?" Frisk asked as he sped along the freeway.

"We've crossed paths a few times," Renji grumbled.

"Hakai, the leader of the dog demons, isn't really your friend, is he?" Frisk's tone was a knowing one.

He ignored him.

"Why was he meeting with Wraith?" he continued, undeterred.

"He's probably a mark."

"Oh, great! You could've mentioned that before we left the base!" he huffed. "You really suck at communicating!"

A loud growl escaped Renji's throat before he could stop it, which roughly translated into, *'Shut the fuck up!'* He was struggling to contain his fury, and Frisk, as always, was pushing it.

"I will *not* shut the fuck up! I'm in this, too, and you need to talk to me!"

He studied the man's furious face. *Did I say that out loud?*

At that moment, the clouds in the sky dissipated, and the night's full moon lit up the sky. Frisk lifted his eyes to the beautiful sight for a few moments before his expression became grave. "Is the full moon going to force you to change in any way?" His voice was dead serious as he sized him up.

Once again, he loudly growled, *'You are, by far, the most annoying and ridiculous human I've ever met in my entire life!'* He began to rub his temples with his clawed hands.

"No, *you* are, by far, the most annoying and ridiculous *wolf demon* I have ever met in my entire life! I'm asking a legitimate question here. I don't have any silver on me to protect me if you change!"

Opening his eyes, he intensely focused on the man. "Are you reading my mind?" he asked, slowly becoming horrified. He, in the very least, thought about killing him a minimum of five times a day.

"Huh? No," he answered, becoming perplexed.

"Then, how are you doing that?"

"How am I doing *what?*" Frisk was becoming exasperated. "You keep saying idiotic things, and I'm just standing up for myself!"

He suspiciously eyed him. After several moments of staring, he looked over Frisk's car.

It was covered in wolf hair. Additionally, the scent of several wolves from his pack was lingering within. If he weren't battling against his demonic bloodlust the whole time, he would have noticed the odors a lot sooner.

When sure his eyes were trained on the road, he barked a few times, studying him for a reaction. *'Why were my wolves in your car?'*

"Huh? Oh, that," Frisk hurriedly said as his eyes flicked over to him. "They were roaming around the base, remember? They seemed interested in getting inside, so I let them in. No harm, right?" He huffed. "They did make a giant mess, though. I have to clean up soon."

Renji's mouth dropped.

"Are you okay?" He worriedly studied him. "Please tell me you're not going through the change—"

"How the fuck are *you* able to speak wolf?"

He sighed. "I guess the wolf is finally out of... Hey, wait. What movie was that from?"

"What?"

The blonde man took a deep breath. "I learned it from you."

"That's impossible!"

"I really did, though," he softly said. "I copied the language from you."

"How?"

"The day you were sedated in the hospital," he said. "I kind of touched you."

Renji just stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

"You do understand how my powers work, don't you?" he asked, becoming annoyed.

"You steal experiences from others."

"I don't like the word 'steal.' I don't take anything away. I just copy some things. Like memories, experiences, and knowledge."

He remained silent as he processed this information.

"Even if you took my UNI-chip out, I could speak over fifty languages and never needed to crack open a book to learn. I can fly a jet or a helicopter, yet I've never taken a course. All I have to do is touch someone who knows, and I instantly know too. It's actually pretty awesome."

"You took the wolves to Shanghai, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did, and it worked out well. They followed my orders in your absence. They're a good group."

He didn't know what to say.

"I hope you don't mind. I wasn't intentionally looking to learn how to speak to them. I was actually checking to see if you really didn't remember what you did to me in Wraith's office. It was the only way I was ever going to be able to trust you again. I needed to see for myself."

"And here we are..."

*'Yes, here we are. Two peas in a pod,'* he barked out as he finally pulled up to Ryunique and parked the car.

Both men exited the vehicle in a hurry, and Renji immediately locked onto Hakai's scent. He then walked in circles a few times before returning to Frisk's side at the entranceway of the restaurant.

"Did you find him?"

"He took a car somewhere."

"So, that means what?"

He didn't answer.

"Are you fucking serious right now? Please tell me you're able to track him, Fang!" he shouted, entirely losing his patience.

Renji scowled at him, flashing his elongated incisors in warning.

"That glowing eyes, fire, and brimstone act isn't going to work on me right now! Did you have any plan going into this *at all*? Of course, the guy took a car. What's he going to do? Walk to his secret hideout? We're in the middle of the city!" Frisk shouted as he rubbed his temples. "Tracking is *your* specialty, not mine!"

The thin thread holding him together was threatening to break. "I need to get to the rooftops, I might be able to find a trace of him somewhere."

"You can't just blindly run off in one direction and hope for the best!" he spat. "Unbelievable! Wraith is a much better tracker than you are. That's for damn sure!"

Before he could break the asshole's nose, a black armored limo pulled up, diverting the men's attention. Both watched as the driver exited the vehicle and quickly made his way to open the rear passenger door.

When the door swung open, a regal passenger swiftly lifted from his seat within, and gracefully walked toward them.

\*\*\*

Hakai paused in front of the two *ROOT* agents, studying them.

One of the men was looking at him with an eerie sense of familiarity. While the other was covered in blood and was about to succumb to demonic bloodlust at any moment.

Raising a finger in the air, he silently ordered his driver to park, before his gaze fell upon Renji.

"Agent *Fang*, I presume?" he said with an air of indifference. "It has come to my attention that you desperately seek my counsel. Whatever could have warranted such a request?"

The wolf demon scowled as he looked at him expectantly.

"Hak—"

"Do not use that name!" he snapped as he pointed to the restaurant. "We shall speak inside."

He huffed in frustration, but followed the given direction and marched into the restaurant Amari was in earlier that night while his companion quickly followed.

When all three men were inside the empty restaurant, Hakai took the lead and walked over to the bar. "You have twenty minutes to indulge me, and then I shall leave. Do make good use of the time."

"She's..." Renji sputtered.

"Wraith is dead," the unknown agent chimed in, his voice low and soft. "We need your help to revive her."

Renji flinched at the use of the dreaded "D" word.

"What is it you would like me to do?" he curtly asked, silently thanking the second agent for getting straight to the point.

"The jewel," the alpha growled. "You can bring her back. You're the only person in this world who can bring her back."

He studied him but did not speak.

As the silence stretched on, it began to weigh on Renji's current state of despair and impatience. "Please. I'm begging you," he growled through clenched teeth. "Please bring her back to me."

Following these words, he dropped to his knees and fell into a Dogeza bow. He positioned his palms flat against the floor with his forehead lowly bowed over them. This was the most submissive form of bowing in Japan used to signify begging or sincere regret.

"I'll give you anything you ask for. I'll do anything you want. Just please... *please* save her," he pleaded into the tile of the floor.

Hakai's eyes imperceptibly widened. He wasn't expecting *this* from the former leader of the United Tribe. He was pretty sure Renji had never bowed to anyone in his entire life.

## Chapter 27

Frisk watched his friend grovel on the floor. "Will you help us?"

"I cannot."

"*What?*" Fang roared. Flying to his feet, he got right into the dog demon's face.

Hakai was unperturbed by the action, but Frisk certainly was.

"Fang, stop! Don't lose your shit! You can't tear him, or this place, up. You promised me you wouldn't lose control!"

"He will do no such thing." With one quick motion of his hand, Hakai easily flung Fang several feet back, as if he were no more than a speck of dirt on his expensive tie.

"Whoa!" he drawled. "Guess there's always a bigger bully..."

The blonde man now turned his attention to him. "Was that all?"

"Is it that you won't help, or is it that you can't?" He tried not to pay attention to the heated growling behind him, which translated into a furious string of curse words.

"I cannot. I do not have such an ability any longer."

"That's bullshit!" Fang roared from behind them.

"Fang seems to think you have a jewel that can revive Wraith. Do you happen to have it with you?"

"Of course, he does!" Fang yelled. "He never leaves home without his mommy's precious keepsake somewhere on his body."

This earned a scowl in his direction.

"Fang, I need you to shut up right now!" Frisk demanded before he turned his attention back to Hakai. "Can we please borrow the jewel?"

"That jewel only obeys me."

"Then, can we borrow you *and* the jewel?" he corrected.

"The jewel is broken."

\*\*\*

"What do you mean the jewel is broken?" Renji roared. He quickly made his way back over to the bar. "How the fuck did *that* happen?"

Not acknowledging the outburst, Hakai kept his eyes trained on Frisk. "What happened to Wraith?" he calmly asked.

"Someone emptied an entire clip into her. That's why we're here," he angrily replied. "What exactly is wrong with the jewel? When you say it's broken, do you mean it doesn't work anymore, or that it's in pieces?"

"It does not work because it is in pieces," he simply said.

"Have you tried to fix it?"

His face tilted to the side as if the thought never occurred to him. "No."

Frisk scratched his head. "Would you let me take a look at it? I can probably glue it back together."

"That will not work."

"You'll never know unless you try."

"The jewel is not a meaningless rock that can be restored in such a barbaric way." His focus shifted over to Renji's state of rage. "It was once a living thing. The physical embodiment of my mother's heart."

"What's it made of then?" he pushed. "Give me something to work with here, our twenty minutes are almost up."

"It is made of calcified tissue."

*Bone*, Renji realized.

Frisk blinked. "Um. Okay. Can I still take a look at it? Do you have it with you?"

The dog demon's eyes narrowed, and he appeared to hesitate for a long moment before he turned on his heel and walked off, exiting the restaurant.

Renji tried to run after him but was held firmly in place by a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Calmness and submissiveness usually work best with his personality type. The complete opposite of what you're doing right now. I know you want to save Wraith, but you won't be able to do that if you piss him off, and he leaves. Whatever you need to do to keep calm, for her sake, do it."

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to regulate his breathing. As much as he hated Frisk at times, the guy was absolutely fucking golden in tough situations, and he was grateful he was there.

A few minutes passed before Hakai returned to the restaurant with a small velvet pouch in hand.

*I knew it! There's no way in hell he'd go anywhere without his mother's heart. It's always with him.*

Hakai opened the pouch and turned it over into his free hand.

Frisk and Renji watched as a ruby red gem fell into his palm. The gem had a jagged edge and was clearly a portion of a much larger whole.

Frisk quickly removed his gloves. "Where's the other half?"

"Over my heart." His free hand went to his neck and lifted a black chain over his head.

The band was holding, what appeared to be, the other half of the gem.

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Holding his right hand out, Frisk silently requested permission to hold the necklace in hopes of studying it.

Rotating the necklace's position, so the broken jewel was pointed down, Hakai gracefully placed it in his outstretched palm.

He hurriedly inspected the broken gem before turning his attention to the part Hakai was now holding out to him. Using his left hand, he gently scooped it out of his palm.

The ruby looked like an ancient artifact. However, it was amazingly kept in excellent condition outside of the apparent break.

"Would you mind if I asked what happened to it?" he curiously asked.

The demon didn't answer.

*He broke it.* He focused on his face. "How does it work?"

"On my command, it can restore life to the recently deceased when placed over the stilled heart. However, it needs to be intact to do so."

"If it can bring Wraith back, can it also heal her wounds?"

"No."

"Alright, then. If I found a way to fix it, would you then be willing to help her?"

"I find myself repeating the obvious. This jewel cannot be fixed."

"But *if it could* be fixed, would you help her?" Frisk pushed.



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Hakai's eyes flicked back over to Renji.

The man was covered in sweat, and he was trembling, his breathing haggard, and his fangs and claws were fully extended. His eyes were red, wide, and desperate. The scent of his dried tears and Amari's blood encased him.

He was obviously fighting with everything he had to stay in control based on one small glimmer of hope he was struggling to hold onto.

"Please?" Renji growled through ragged breaths.

It was disgusting. And it was familiar. A little too familiar for Hakai's liking.

When Kichi was taken away from him, he found himself in an eerily similar state. He easily lost all semblance of composure and messily dropped to his knees before the Anamnesis Terrene... and begged. Yes, *he* begged and pleaded with a jewel that would no longer listen, a jewel that could not help him as there wasn't anything left of Kichi's body to revive.

He allowed himself to hope, and the loss of this hope was as heartbreaking as losing Kichi herself. In his rage, he took to his true dog form and unleashed his fury on the precious gem that once allowed Kichi to stay by his side. The same gem that was now a valueless reminder of the pain of her loss.

He had broken the Anamnesis Terrene in two.

"Humph. Ridiculous." He turned his nose in the air and crossed his arms over his chest.

Before Renji could react to the dismissal, the other agent chimed in, capturing the attention of both men.

"Great! Thank you!" He happily pulled out his phone.

Both demons shot the man a thoroughly puzzled look.

*Did he not understand?*

"Hey, Anatomy! I need the mother of all favors from you right now!" he shouted into the phone. "Tell me you have someone who can heal calcified tissue." He checked his watch. "Yes, as in, bone."

A few seconds passed before he spoke again.

"Pull yourself together, damn it! We found someone who might be able to bring her back!" He eyed Hakai. "But it all depends on if

you have someone who can heal broken bones extremely well - and I'm talking mint condition!"

A few more seconds ticked by.

"Great, pull all of them in. I'm going to need them to fix a gem made of bone." He paused. "Yeah, I know it doesn't make any sense, but just roll with it. Once your people heal this gem, we should have a chance at reviving Wraith. And when we bring her back, I'm going to need your very best people on hand to heal her wounds before we lose her again. Okay? Got it!"

He hung up and eyed Hakai again. "You ready?"

He felt his patience growing thin. "I never agreed to help."

"You never agreed not to."

He blinked a few times, confused by the man's use of a double negative.

"Should we take my car or yours?" he innocently asked, turning to leave with each of the broken halves of the Anamnesis Terrene in his hands.

"Do you find me to be a fool?" Hakai hissed from his unmoving position at the bar.

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Frisk sighed. "Fang, I need you to step outside." He juggled the two pieces of the jewel around while he put his gloves back on.

"*What?*"

"Just listen to me for once in your God damn life! Go, wait outside!"

Fang looked between Frisk and Hakai before stomping his way out of the restaurant.

As soon as the door slammed behind him, he turned to address the leader of the dog demons.

"You honestly *do* want to help Wraith. But, you *don't* want to help Fang. So I'm sparing you from cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"How pretentious of you," Hakai accused, his voice now low in warning.

"You *are* going to help," he smoothly said, unaffected by the dangerous look being cast in his direction. "Not for any other reason

other than because you want to, and because *Kichi* would have wanted you to as well."

Scowling, he began growling. "Who are you?" His posture dropped as if he were about to pounce at any moment.

"The name's Frisk, and I'm Wraith's best friend. I'm someone who cares about her," he softly said, choosing his next words very carefully. "Good *must* triumph over evil today, and you're the only shot we have at making it happen. I'll give you a few minutes to compose yourself, and when you're ready, meet us outside." He met his eyes before exiting the restaurant.

Once outside, he leaned against the wall near the entrance while he watched Fang nervously pace in circles. Unlike his friend, his mind was sharp and his nerves, calm. Sadly, the only time his ADHD disappeared was when all hell was breaking loose around him.

"He's not going to help." Fang stopped walking and buried his face in trembling, clawed hands.

He admired the moon above. "He might."

"He won't because I'm a wolf demon."

"I don't think that's it."

"You have no idea. Dog demons hate wolf demons, and wolf demons hate dog demons. It's way over your head."

He once again inspected the broken halves of the jewel. "Way over yours..."

"What's that supposed to mean? What exactly did you say to him in there? Why couldn't I stay?" He dropped his hands away from his face and continued in his frantic march.

"Not today, but when this is over, you need to apologize to him. If you need to kiss the floor again to do so, I suggest you do it."

Fang halted, his head swinging roughly in Frisk's direction. "Apologize for *what*?"

*God help us.* "Keep your fucking voice down," he hissed. "Once upon a time, there was a very young idiot named *Renji*. Renji decided it was a good idea to loudly profess his love to a haphazard priestess named *Risa* before running into battle. Unfortunately, by doing so, the moron happily gave up the element of surprise."

Fang stared at him, utterly stupefied.

"As a result, the opposition was ready for the strike, and many more dog demons, wolf demons, and holy users died in the battle than probably should have." He placed the two halves of the jewel together, inspecting the break.

"That battle was my greatest shame," Fang stammered, his eyes wide in shock. "On so many levels."

"That's why he didn't want to help you—"

The sound of the restaurant door opening interrupted him. Both men then watched Hakai calmly walk between them while raising a finger in the air.

"We'll take my car." The dog demon didn't spare either of them a glance as his armored limo pulled up.

"Are you really okay with coming to the base?" Frisk quickly asked, recalling their earlier skin-to-skin contact. "We can always bring the medical team, along with Wraith's body, to you. Whatever you need, just say the word."

Hakai seemed to hesitate as he pondered this. "It is best to go to the base. If this actually works, she will be in the best place to receive medical attention."

He nodded before approaching, his voice falling to the smallest of whispers as he neared his ear. "Do you want a disguise of some sort?"

"You know who I truly am, then," he whispered in return.

"A secret I'll take to the grave," Frisk swore. "So, like I said before, if you need something, tell me, and I'll make it happen."

Hakai dropped his head, waiting for his driver to open his door. "Advise your medical staff that agent Wraith can only accept donor blood from non-gifted beings." He then dropped into the awaiting car.

Frisk and Renji followed right behind him.

## Chapter 28

Amari laughed as Tenrai piggybacked her over to meet the others, tightly grabbing onto his robe so she wouldn't fall.

"I've actually missed this!"

"Just like old times, isn't it?" he called back to her.

"Are the others far?"

"No, we're almost there."

Tenrai was true to his word. It was only a few moments before they approached a small group of people sitting near a tranquil pond.

"Look who I found!" He proudly smiled as Amari peeked out from over his shoulder.

"Risa!" the group joyfully shouted as they ran over to greet her.

Dismounting from Tenrai's back, she quickly found herself held tightly within Yuri's and Shinji's arms.

"You have no idea how much we've missed you," Yuri softly said through her tears.

"Seeing you again brings such joy to my heart, Risa," Shinji said as he beamed at her.

She squeezed the couple tightly. "I've missed you both so much."

Yuri took her arm. "Come, we have so much to catch up on!"

"We have nothing but time. There's no rush." Shinji watched her drag their old friend over to the pond.

Amari barely managed to sit on the ground before she was bombarded.

"You're quite a lovely woman!" Yuri's eyes twinkled. "I want to know everything about your life! What happened to you? What became of you?"

*How to answer that?* she wondered. "Well, first off, my name is Amari now," she corrected. "In my most recent life, I joined a secret organization that fights evil. There are a bunch of others there, and they all have special powers. I worked very hard and became the leader of my own group!"

"An organization that fights evil? So nothing's changed then. You continued fighting to save the world." Tenrai took a seat next to her. "I'd expect nothing less."

"Thank you." She couldn't help but blush at the praise.

"Did you ever get married?" Yuri quickly asked.

"Any children?" Shinji added.

"No, no children. I sort of got married..." she struggled to complete the sentence. "But not in a human way."

Tenrai rolled his eyes.

"Not in a human way?" Shinji repeated, completely confused.

"She thinks she 'mated' with Renji," Tenrai grumbled. "Of all the people in the fucking world, it had to be with *Renji*."

Yuri and Shinji gasped.

"Is that true?" the priestess asked in disbelief.

"I told you she fell in love with him. The day he professed his love so boldly on top of that mountain. There was no way—"

Shinji wasn't able to complete the sentence as Yuri sharply elbowed him in the ribs.

"So Renji did manage to find you, after all these years," she whispered.

Tenrai crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. "Ain't that a real bitch."

"You couldn't expect she wouldn't move on—"

"I *did* expect her to move on. Hell, I hoped she had. I always wanted her to be happy. I didn't have any illusions! I pictured that when I'd finally get to see her again, she'd tell me about a loving husband and a mess of kids. But this... this isn't fair!" he hissed. "Why'd it have to be *him*? That guy wasn't anything but an arrogant, selfish, piece of shit!"

Amari chuckled. "He actually said the same *exact* thing about you!"

"You see! I've been dead for centuries, and he's still running his mouth!"

"How'd you find each other again?" Shinji interrupted.

"We were on a mission. We didn't know it before then, but we happened to work for the same organization. It was an accident, but I like to think of it as an act of fate." She momentarily smiled at the memory before it quickly faded. "And now, I've lost him again."

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Renji wasn't sure what was worse, having to beg Hakai for help or having to listen to him and Frisk bond over their shared interest in the arts. The exclusive conversation they were both having in the car was slowly driving him mad.

Desperate to save what was left of his sanity, he chose to interrupt the rapidly budding 'bromance' before he actually vomited.

"Thank you for doing this. I really meant what I said. I'll do anything to repay you," he swore, cutting off the obnoxious conversation about Picasso's reoccurring themes of blindness in his earlier works.

Hakai didn't seem to appreciate the interruption. "Do not flatter yourself. There is nothing in this world *you* could provide that would be of any value to me. I am not doing this for *you*."

*Do not react.* Biting the inside of his cheek, he tried to concentrate on the classical music playing in the background. "Thank you for doing this for Wraith then," he said through clenched teeth.

"Ah. Mal Di Luna, as sung by Summer Watson." Frisk closed his eyes and tilted his head back. "She has the voice of an angel. Truly."

*Huh?* He eyed him suspiciously.

Hakai instantly focused on Frisk. "*You* appreciate the reinvented classics, as well?"

"Of course! Who doesn't? Wraith and I would go to see Summer every time she'd do a show in South Korea. She actually turned me on to her years ago."

"Humph. At least she has fine taste..." Hakai's eyes swayed back over to him. "In *some* things."

"Why *you*—"

Frisk broke out into a fit of unbridled laughter. "Fang, knock it off!" he shouted between his gasps for air. "He's so right, though! I honestly have no idea what the hell Wraith sees in you. I ask myself every day—"

"Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on yours. I'm just saying. You're not her usual... type."

"What's her usual type, then?" he roared, finally losing his patience with the idiotic conversation.

"Well, someone like *me*..." He winked. "Or... *him*." He pointed to Hakai. "He fits the standard man Wraith would usually date. You know, calm, sophisticated, reliable, powerful, handsome..."

Hakai seemed to appreciate the compliment and rewarded Frisk by blinking.

"After this is over, Frisk, I'm going to kill you. I promise I am," Renji muttered.

"Whatever. From the looks of those twins of yours, your *reputation*, and all the women that fly out of the woodwork just to throw themselves at you every chance they get, I'd say Wraith isn't your usual type either. So don't get so bent out of shape."

"She's not."

"Twins?" Hakai looked between the two men in the darkness of the limo.

"Yup, two identical blonde twins. At the same time!" Frisk incredulously said. "Can you freaking believe that?"

The dog demon's eyebrow twitched.

Luckily, before the joint bullying session could continue, the entrance to the base finally came into view.

"Thank God!" Renji lowered his window and addressed the guards, hurriedly passing them his credentials.

The agents quickly looked over his information. "We've been expecting you. Anatomy is waiting for you in the hospital lobby."

"Understood." His palms were sweating, and his heart was racing in his chest.

*What if this doesn't work?* Unable to cope with the possibility of failure, he found himself praying to a higher power. *I'll do anything. Anything in this world, if it is to save her.*

As soon as the car parked, Frisk and Renji bolted. But, they found they had to stop in their tracks to wait for their third member who didn't seem to be in as much of a hurry.

When the dog demon finally caught up to them, they slowed their pace to match his and steered him in the direction of the base's hospital.

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Anatomy was pacing the lobby when agents Frisk and Fang walked in with a tall blonde man. The moment he caught sight of them, he shouted to the large team gathered behind him.

"It's go time, people! I want nothing but the very best from each of you in everything you do, starting with this very moment! We *have* to save Wraith. Failure isn't an option!"

At the words, the large group broke away and separated into two rooms behind him.

Jogging over to Fang, he said, "We're ready. Where's the jewel?"

"He has it." He gestured to the man wearing a suit at his side.

"Then, sir, please follow me." Anatomy quickly made his way to the room on the left while all three men followed behind him.

The room was uninteresting outside of the flat metal table occupying its center. On the far side of the room was an entrance leading to an X-Ray area.

Anatomy gestured to the two men and one woman standing near the table. "These are the best orthopedic specialists that I have. All have gifts that allow them to fuse together and heal broken bones. As this is a special case, and the bone isn't connected to any living tissue, we'll try our very best, but we can't promise anything."

The man in the designer suit walked to the table and gently placed two broken halves of a red jewel on its smooth surface. "The gem, the Anamnesis Terrene, is a living thing. It may not have living tissue, but it does feel."

"Understood," he replied. "We will be gentle, and we will respect it."

Nodding, the blonde backed away from the table as two of the doctors stepped up and inspected the jewel.

"Where did this bone come from? Is it from an animal?" one of the doctors asked.

"It is the embodiment of my mother's heart," the mystery man replied.

The specialist stared at him. "Um. Okay?"

"It came from a dog demon," Fang attempted to clarify.

This earned several other confused looks.

*First wolf demons and now, dog demons*, Anatomy thought as he studied the blonde man in awe. "I don't think we have any information about dog demons in our database."

"Most likely not," Frisk interjected. "This is our first time hearing about them."

"This... ah... heart... is your mother's?" he repeated, his mind scrambling, as he looked at the beautiful dog demon.

"Yes."

He had an idea. Quickly glancing at the doctors standing over the Anamnesis Terrene, he met their eyes.

His people nodded in agreement, obviously thinking the same exact thing.

Turning to the blonde man, he said, "Would you be opposed to providing us with a tissue sample, then? We can use the live tissue as a connector. Your mother's jewel shouldn't reject your DNA since the encoding would be genetically similar. This could be a simple way for us to heal and fuse the break."

The man didn't seem too happy with the idea, and his eyelids slightly lowered in annoyance.

Not missing the reaction, he immediately attempted to put him at ease. "Before you object, I would just need to swab your mouth. Nothing invasive, I promise."

He turned his nose in the air. "Get on with it."

\*\*\*

Hakai heard Renji release a loud breath of relief as the head doctor got to work swabbing his mouth. The man then applied the collected cells to the inside of a small petri dish.

"Replicate, work your magic." The chief doctor passed the small dish to a woman who came forth from the table.

Focusing on the small dish, it became bathed in orange light. You could actually see something inside becoming larger before she returned to the two other doctors at the table. "I've got this started. I'm going to apply it to the break. I'll keep it going until you tell me to stop."

"Got it."

Using a scalpel, Replicate scraped the tissue out of the dish and placed it on the Anamnesis Terrene's fracture. Once she applied a generous amount, one of the male doctors aligned the two broken pieces and pushed them together. She then forced the tissue around the outside break.

"You can stop now. It's my turn." The second doctor touched his finger to the tissue.

All watched as it began to solidify. As the tissue hardened to bone, the third doctor began to lightly scrape at it, smoothing it along to fit the original angle and edges of the gem.

After a few minutes, he declared he was finished.

The jewel visibly looked as though it had never been broken in the first place.

Hakai hurriedly walked over to it, tracing his fingers over its smooth surface as he intensely inspected it.

All eyes in the room were focused on him.

Glancing at Renji, he took the jewel into his hand and covered it with his palm. When the Anamnesis Terrene pulsed, he fought to keep the shock from his expression.

He honestly could not believe it.

He then addressed the onlookers in the room. "The heart beats once again."

\*\*\*

It felt as though several hours passed as Amari chatted with her long lost friends before a new voice called out to her. As she looked up to track it, she noticed a young woman running toward her from the other side of the pond.

"Lady Risa! I'll be right there!" She tried to run over in her tightly wrapped kimono, but couldn't manage more than a few small steps.

"Keh. We'll be waiting all day at this rate," Tenrai grumbled as he watched her struggle.

"That's not very nice. Go help her," Yuri chided.

"Why? It's more fun this way!"

"Go!" she ordered.

Sucking his teeth, he ran over to the woman, slung her over his shoulder, and brought her to the group. When he placed her on her feet, she turned around and widely smiled at Amari.

She felt her heart skip a beat. It was as if she were looking into a mirror. Aside from the color of the woman's eyes, she looked *exactly* like her.

"Lady Risa! Is it really you?" The woman bounced up and down on the heels of her feet, much like a child.

"She goes by Amari now, Sis." Tenrai corrected.

Amari's eyes widened, and her mouth went slack. "*Kichi*?"

"You remember me! That makes me so very happy!"

The words fell from her lips before she could stop them, "Hakai desperately misses you."

The happy expression faded from Kichi's face for a moment before she lit up once again. "I desperately miss him, too! Not a moment passes where I don't think about him!" She laughed. "Have you actually run into him again recently?"

"Yes! Today, actually. It's a really long story, but all he did was talk about you. He even started a secret organization to fight evil in your honor!"

"*He did*?" Her voice was full of wonder. "Then, he really did listen to all my ideas on the resistance of oppressive tactics!"

"Huh?"

"*ROOT!*" She giggled. "I'm so glad to hear he still remembers me. It's been such a long time, and I'm afraid I still have a very long while to wait until I'm able to see him again," she huffed, her voice becoming sad.

Amari studied Kichi's appearance. She looked to be the same age as her. Her long hair was pulled back into a thick and ornate bun adorned with flowers. She wore a pink and white Kimono embroidered with small doves on the long sleeves. She looked like a royal empress.

"How are you over four hundred years old?" she asked. "You don't look a day older than me."

"Everyone here is young. Our souls assume the appearances we were the most comfortable with during our lifetimes. However, I looked exactly like this when I died, and yes, I was very old," she said, remembering.

"How was that possible?"

"It was a gift." A wide smile appeared on her face. "A gift that would allow me to stay with Hakai for the rest of his days," she paused. "However, there were certain limitations. That's why I'm here."

"How did it work?" she asked, becoming perplexed.

"The Anamnesis Terrene can do more than revive the dead if it's inspired to do so," she devilishly said. "It can also transfer one's life force into another."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"The Anamnesis Terrene took half of Hakai's life force and gave it to me. It was a gift of time, Amari. Enough time to allow me to stay by his side until he took his last breath. But then something terrible happened, and now I'm stuck here waiting for him."

"How would the jewel be inspired to do more than revive the dead?"

"A selfless sacrifice," she simply said. "The Anamnesis Terrene can read the hearts of others, Lady Amari. If one is selflessly willing to offer their life for the sake of another, the jewel could be moved enough to bind them together." She took her hand. "Hakai was always afraid of losing me, and one day, he offered his own life in exchange for mine. The jewel judged his heart and gave me a gift in his honor, the gift of his time."

## Chapter 29

Renji watched as Anatomy pulled out his phone and quickly dialed a number after hearing Hakai's proclamation. He then tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for the other party to answer.

"Bring Wraith's body into room two. We're ready." With this, he motioned Renji, Frisk, and Hakai to the door.

"Come follow me for stage two. We've already prepared her body. If this works, I'll be working on her personally." He paused, before addressing Renji directly. "Is that going to be a problem, Fang? I will be looking at places you might not like, and I *will* be putting my hands on her. I cannot have you in the room, obstructing her treatment, or putting my staff in danger."

He shook his head. "No, it won't be a problem at all. Anything it takes to save her... I won't get in the way," he promised.

As the small group collectively followed the head of the Medical Research Department, they noticed as several people burst into the lobby, wheeling a body covered by a black body bag.

Renji forced himself to look away. The thought of Amari lying in that thing made him sick. However, he wasn't able to avoid the sight of it for very long. The moment he entered the new room, she was wheeled in.

Watching as the staff unzipped the bag, he studied his mate's current state. Her skin now had a blue hue, and she looked frozen. She was wearing a flimsy hospital gown tied loosely in the front, which would allow the medical staff access to the many bullet holes in her chest. Several unconnected IV needles were poking out of her skin, as well.

Apparently, she was prepared in a way that would allow for immediate medical treatment.

Frisk pegged Anatomy with a hard stare. "You got my message about the blood?"

"Taken care of."

The staff gently positioned Amari's stiff body on the hospital bed, and Renji flew to her side, entwining her cold, lifeless hand in his.

"I'm ready," Anatomy announced.

\*\*\*

Hakai stepped forward, raised the jewel above his head, and waited for the telltale pulse.

After several silent moments passed, he began to worry.

Hesitantly lowering his hands, he looked upon the jewel. *What is it, mother?*

The jewel pulsed several times in response. The action prompted him to eye Renji suspiciously before a memory was pulled forth into his consciousness.

*"I trust him. I love him. My very soul lives within him..."*

"We have a problem." He lowered the jewel and walked over to Renji. "Apparently, a part of Wraith's soul exists here." He held the wolf demon's eyes. "As long as this remains the case, the jewel will not be able to call the rest of her soul back into this world."

"What?" Renji sputtered. He looked as though he'd just been shot in the chest. "We don't have time for your riddles. What the fuck do you mean?" he demanded.

"Half of her spirit is permanently entwined with yours, in *your* body. It is not something that can ever be separated. Therefore, the jewel cannot pull her soul back from the other side, without pulling *your* soul out of your body as well," he hissed. "Not that I mind. I have no problem killing you."

"*What?* You have to be kidding me? So what the hell do we do now?" Frisk shouted.

A heavy silence blanketed the room, along with a thick feeling of dread.

\*\*\*

"Take it," Renji simply said. "Tell the jewel to take it."

"*What?* Fang, you can't be serious. You can't do that!" Frisk yelled in disbelief.

"Yes, I can. It was her gift to me, and I can give it back," he humbly said. He released Amari's hand and gently smoothed over her cold cheek with his fingers.

"Wraith wouldn't want that! You know that!" Frisk continued as he began to fall into hysterics. "Think about what you're saying."

You'll die. It'll break her heart, damn it! Don't do that to her! She wouldn't want to be here if it meant you had to die for it to happen!"

"I've been on this earth for a very long time." He studied his mate's beautiful face. "I don't know how I know, but I do know I'll see her again one day. She is human, so I won't have to wait too long. She deserves to have a life, however long or short it may be, she deserves to finally have one. It's the least I can do for her. She'll be pissed, but I'll see her again soon."

"Fang..." Anatomy trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"When she comes back, please tell her it'll always be her." He softly kissed his mate's lips. "She worried that I'd eventually leave her if she got too old. But, honestly, I don't think I ever would've even noticed. It's always been her, and it'll always be her. Please let her know that."

"Oh, hell!" Frisk looked up at the ceiling, obviously struggling to keep his composure.

Anatomy sucked his teeth and diverted his gaze as well.

Several moments of heavy silence ticked by before Hakai's cold voice said, "Are you ready?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Hakai lifted the Anamnesis Terrene high into the air. The gem instantly began to pulse wildly in his hands, so forcefully that it shook them. He then lowered the jewel, pointedly staring at it.

A moment passed before he walked over to Renji, holding the legendary jewel out to him. "You must do it."

"What?"

"This situation is very different, so the needs of the gem are very different, as well."

He looked down at the jewel.

"You need to impale the tip of the gem into her heart. Once you do, it will transfer her soul from your body, as well as call the rest of it forth from the afterlife."

Hakai's green eyes intensely bored into Renji's as he pressed the jewel into his hand. Abruptly bending down, he then drew Amari's body into his arms and lowered to the floor.

Apparently, he was offering the additional leverage needed to forcefully swing the jewel down and into her heart.



"Do it now," he ordered as he tightly held her lifeless body against him. "Ensure you do not let go of the gem, no matter what happens."

Taking a deep breath, Renji closed his eyes. *I'm ready. I will see you again, Amari. I love you with all I am. I will wait for you.*

Without any hesitation, he slammed the sharp tip of the gem through her sternum and into her heart.

At the contact, the jewel exploded in blinding, red light. The Anamnesis Terrene burned with such incredible heat that it scorched his hands along with the rest of his body, but he refused to let it go.

The wave of energy soon became so intense that he was blown backward, jewel in hand.

"What? Wait!" he shouted. "I didn't let go! What happened?" he roared.

\*\*\*

After her explanation of the Anamnesis Terrene's gift, Kichi reached out to pull Amari to her feet.

When she tried to grasp onto the offered hand, her own hand began to dematerialize, passing right through her.

She stared down at her body. "What's happening?"

The others in the group noticed as well, all rushing to surround her.

"It's not your time," Kichi softly said.

"What? That's not possible!" Tenrai roared. "We just found you again!" He desperately tried to pull her up and into his arms.

However, his hands passed right through her.

"We'll see her again," Yuri softly said. "Please don't forget about us, Amari."

"I could never forget about you. Any of you!" she said through hurried breaths.

"Tell Hakai to live a little every once in a while. He has to for both of us now!" Kichi happily said. "And tell him my love for him is, and will always be, eternal, and I miss him every day. And please, *please* tell him that his mother didn't leave him to reunite with her lover."

Amari held her eyes.

"She struck a deal with the gods. She offered her life in exchange for a power that could spare her beloved son from ever having to experience the same pain that she did." Tears began to fall from Kichi's eyes. "Let him know that Lady Anamnesis' soul is here with me, but her heart will always be with *him*."

\*\*\*

Renji heard a small sputtering sound echo within the hospital room.

"She is alive!" Hakai shouted, instantly lifting and placing Amari's body on the bed.

"I'm on it!" Anatomy ran over, jumped onto the bed, and straddled her chest. "Nurses, start IV connections, and monitors immediately!" he roared.

Renji watched on in a stupor as numerous bodies flew to his mate's bedside, connecting her to a multitude of devices and IV bags. In a total of two seconds, Anatomy opened her gown, placed his hands on her torso, and engulfed her within a bright, neon green glow.

The light was fierce and blinding, and it was evident to everyone in the room that the man was putting everything he fucking had into healing her wounds and all of the surrounding damage.

"Get her blood flowing!"

Several healers surrounded the department head, placing their hands on Amari's body.

"Heat! Bring on the heat!" he ordered, as two thick, electric blankets were draped over her legs.

Renji had never seen anything like this. The way Anatomy was acting, he might as well have been leading a small fleet out to war.

A muffled scream rang in the air.

"That's right. Your organs are coming back to life. Don't fight it, Wraith! Breathe through it. You have to listen to me!"

A nearby heart monitor, which up until this point had been silent, abruptly came to life, frantically sounding off beside the bed.

*Amari?* Renji scrambled to his feet as tears flooded his vision. He tried to get as close as he could while staying out of the way of the numerous medical professionals that were hurriedly working on her.

"Renji," a weak voice called out amid the chaos in the room.  
"Where. Is. Renji?"

"Who?" Anatomy asked.

"I'm right here!" he shouted from the back of the room. "Don't worry, I'm right here with you, baby! These people need to finish up! Once they do, I'll be right there!" His voice cracked as he wiped his eyes.

She didn't respond. Instead, he was suddenly engulfed within a gentle purple light. He instantly felt Amari's presence come alive inside him, stroking him, holding him tightly.

The deafening roar that was sounding off in his head over the past few hours was suddenly replaced by a sharp whimper. And the loving connection provided him with so much damn relief that his knees buckled, and he messily dropped to the floor, his eyes closing as he basked in her essence.

Amari weakly smiled, and she appeared to relax for a moment as she also lost herself in their connection.

"Anatomy. Hurry. Up."

\*\*\*

"*Hurry up?*" Anatomy repeated, shocked by the resurrected agent's audacity. "Wraith, you're barely alive. I have a lot of work I still have to do." He finished healing the internal damage the bullets caused before sealing up the gaping holes that once littered her chest.

Rolling her onto her side, his glowing, green hands made their way to her back. Focusing his energy on now healing the exit wounds, he watched as the holes twisted together into angry scars before they transformed into raised pink marks.

*Just a few more seconds and there will be no trace of any damage. Then I can work on her muscles.*

He glanced at the numerous bags hanging from above. "We need more blood!"

"Right away. I'm on it," a nurse responded as she connected a new bag to Wraith's IV.

"Christ. We've already given you six pints." He shook his head.

"Sorry," she wheezed.

He sucked his teeth. "Don't be. It's just, at your size, your total blood volume would be around nine. You pretty much lost all of it."

"I died," she weakly said. "But I got to see my friends again." A small, eerie smile ghosted over her lips.

"Try not to speak anymore. I'll be done soon. Just rest."

Nodding, she closed her eyes.

Twenty minutes passed before his hands finally stopped glowing. Thoroughly checking her over several times, he finally passed her care over to the sonogram technicians. "Check all of her vital organs. Make sure I didn't miss anything." He finally stepped away from Wraith's side.

The rest of the medical staff, with exception to two technicians and two critical care nurses, exited the room. After all the bodies emptied out, Anatomy noticed that only three men remained, huddled in the corner.

He made a point to look Fang over. His appearance was back to normal, and he was kneeling on the floor, watching as the technicians worked on Wraith through relaxed hooded lids. He was also glowing.

"I never thought I'd say this, but it looks like she's going to be just fine," he softly said, finally allowing himself to relax as well.

## Chapter 30

Renji slowly turned his head and met Anatomy's eyes. "How can I ever thank you?"

He laughed. "You can start by never trying to kill me ever again. Then I'd consider us to be even."

He nodded, his eyes now dropping to the floor. "I never apologized to you, did I?" he mumbled. "I'm sorry for what I did. I'd love to promise I won't do it again, but my brain and my body never seem to be on the same page anymore, so I won't bother lying."

"Wraith and I were actually going to talk about that specific problem in the morning." Anatomy glanced over to the woman's resting form. "Before all this happened, that is."

"When she's up to it, I'd actually like it if all three of us talked about a possible solution," he bit out. "She's been handling all of the dirty work because I've been too afraid to ask for help. It's about time I started getting involved, too."

"I'd honestly like that."

"And, thank you for all you did for her tonight. She would have died all over again if it weren't for you," he admitted. "I'm grateful I didn't kill you back in Wraith's office."

"Um. You're welcome... and thank you?" Anatomy hesitantly said before exiting the room.

Once the department head was out of earshot, Renji spoke again. "Why am I still alive?" he asked, directing the question to Hakai, while his eyes remained trained on Amari.

"It was a test," he whispered. "And you passed."

"Can you ever answer anything clearly?" he grumbled, thankful for the tranquility Amari was providing him with as he quietly glowed.

"The Anamnesis Terrene had no difficulty in calling her back from the afterlife. Doing so never would have affected your soul or her soul's presence within it," he said in a matter of fact tone. "My mother's heart wanted to give you a greater gift, but she needed to read your level of devotion first. So I had to devise a way in which to test you."

He sighed. "In simple words, please?"

Hakai chuckled. "Wraith doesn't have to worry about growing old any time soon. The Anamnesis Terrene gave her half of what's left of your natural life. She will now be able to stay by your side for the rest of your days," he said, his tone becoming nostalgic. "But keep this in mind, wolf. A soul can only be called back from the afterlife by the Anamnesis Terrene once," he warned. "You must do everything in your power to keep her safe from this point forward."

Ripping his gaze away from Amari, he stared at the dog demon in disbelief. "*What?*"

"Are you deaf or just dumb?"

"I don't understand," he stammered.

Frisk huffed. "Jesus, Fang. It's pretty simple. The jewel likes you, so it took care of two very big problems. It brought Wraith back to life, *and* it gave her the same lifespan as you." He smirked. "It's fucking magical. Now you two can grow old and ugly *together*. Wait until Wraith hears that she can look forward to many centuries filled with you and all of your constant chaos. She's going to be so excited!" he sarcastically said. "So, just make sure she doesn't die again until your ass is already in the ground."

Hakai cleared his throat as he struggled to suppress a laugh.

Renji looked at him in disbelief. "How can I ever repay you?" He attempted to process the meaning behind the two priceless gifts he just received.

The man closed his eyes in evident agitation.

"I owe you a very big apology, too," he softly said, more so to himself.

"If you are thinking about bowing again, *do not*."

"Words truly can't express just how much my idiotic behavior during the battle with Wynter shames me. Because of my immaturity and stupidity that night, many people died." Renji once again dropped into a low bow at Hakai's feet. "That battle was a humbling experience, and it forever changed me," he swore. "All I can do is seek your forgiveness for the stupid boy I was once," he whispered, before pausing. "And also, thank you for coming here and saving Wraith's life tonight. I am forever in your debt," he repentantly said.

"Get up!" Hakai hissed as the sonogram technicians, and critical care nurses finally exited the room. He was about to lose his patience.

"Please don't fight."

Amari's simple, soft words fully captured the men's attention, and Renji bolted to her side.

As Frisk also tried to make his way over to her, a firm hand took hold of his arm, stopping him.

"Wait," Hakai calmly said.

Renji didn't hesitate to take her into a gentle hug. He wanted to do more but was wary of all the tubes and wires she was connected to. Instead, he sat at her bedside, choosing to hold her hand in both of his.

At the contact, they spoke at the same time, "I'm so sorry!"

"Why are *you* sorry?" they both responded.

Amari giggled. "Me first."

Fighting back tears, Renji brought her hand up to his lips and kissed each of her fingers.

"You were right. You knew something was going to happen to me tonight. You knew it, and I didn't listen to you. I just wrote it all off as another misguided mating episode. I was so mad at you for giving me a hard time, and I was absolutely livid you lied to me and followed me, but you were only trying to protect me. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." Her eyes filled with tears.

"There isn't anything to forgive. I don't blame you for writing it off. I was trying to write my feelings off the whole time too. With everything we've been through lately, *I* don't even trust my instincts anymore. There was no way either of us could have known what was going to happen tonight. I'm sorry I lied to you, but one good thing came out of it all. If I didn't see *you know who* tonight, it never would've dawned on me to look for him after..." he trailed off.

"After I died?" she finished.

"Yeah." he choked out.

\*\*\*

Amari squeezed his hand and looked at Hakai. She wanted to call him over, but noticing that Frisk was also in the room, she struggled with what name to use to call out to him.

Instead, she met his eyes and smiled, motioning him over with her free hand.

He gracefully stepped forward, his head raised in the air as he glided to her bed.

"I'm sorry, baby, but can you give us a minute?"

Renji hesitated. But did eventually release her before returning to Frisk in the corner of the room.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "If you're here, it means your cover has been blown, doesn't it?"

"The one named Frisk is somehow aware of who I really am in this organization. However, the imbecile now at his side, does not." He quickly glanced over to the men in the corner. "Do not worry yourself. Frisk appears to be trustworthy. He shall not say anything."

"I have a feeling I'm here tonight because of your jewel. Thank you."

He nodded.

"I have a message for you." Her voice was becoming tired.

Taking a seat next to her on the bed, he leaned over her, positioning his ear over her lips.

"I saw her, and she's waiting for you. She said not a day goes by where she doesn't miss you and her love for you is, and will always be, eternal." She smiled. "She also wants you to live a little once in a while. She said you have to for both your sakes."

Hakai's hand coasted over hers, seemingly without his consent.

"She was wearing a pink and white kimono with doves embroidered on the sleeves. Her hair was in a big bun adorned with flowers. She really was quite beautiful."

A small smile found its way to his lips. "That kimono was my mother's," he whispered. "She wore it on our wedding day."

Amari's eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she wrapped her hand around his, causing him to flinch.

"Your mother..." she stammered as she looked away from his face and down at his hand. "Your mother's soul is with Kichi on the other side, but her heart will always remain with you," she hurriedly said in the smallest of whispers. "Kichi needed you to know that your mother didn't leave you to be with her lover. She exchanged her life for a power that would allow you to be spared from ever having to experience the same pain she once did." She didn't understand the message but found it to be utterly moving nonetheless.



When she finally chanced a glance up at Hakai's face, she realized he had sat back, and his eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

\*\*\*

"Thank you," Hakai softly said after several moments of stretched silence. "That knowledge is... *priceless* to me." He opened his eyes and gently removed his hand from Amari's grasp, using it to wipe away her tears.

*She gave up her heart... to protect mine...*

"You're most welcome." She weakly smiled. "I saw Tenrai, too. He was waiting for me. He was the one to take me to meet the others."

He didn't miss the way Renji loudly growled in the background.

*He is eavesdropping!*

Amari seemed to catch on as well.

Whipping his head around, he curled his lip and bared his fanged teeth.

Frisk looked between the two men before he smacked Renji on the back of the head. Hard.

"Do you do this shit on purpose? Is it your life's mission to piss everybody off?" he grumbled. "Mind your business, would ya?"

"Tenrai still hates you, by the way!" Amari shouted over to him.

He scowled, and the sight prompted her to smile. "Don't worry. I won't bother you with the details."

He rubbed his head. "Please don't."

*I shall now take my leave.* Hakai lifted from the bed. "I will be in touch, Miss Wraith.

Frisk cheerfully jogged over to his side. "I'll walk you out."

\*\*\*

Ellie hid inside the Interrogation Department's server room while agents continued to move about on the floor.

She cursed her luck. They hadn't found her yet, but would soon if she didn't get out of there.

When she jumped into Char's body, her primary goal was to use the woman's cell phone to make a quick report to her superior and

request extraction. Once she managed that, she planned on rescuing her real body.

Unfortunately, Char didn't have her damn phone on her!

At the very least, she was thankful that this body wasn't captured yet. This woman had an enormous power at her disposal that she could use, if needed, to hold *ROOT* agents off until a pickup arrived.

However, if she couldn't get her ass over to a phone soon, her entire mission would have been for naught.

When the voices in the hallway finally quieted, Ellie took a chance and crept over to one of the dark, empty offices. She didn't want to be tied to a landline, but time was running out, and she didn't have many other options.

She succeeded in crossing the hall and entering a random office to her left. Quietly closing the door behind her, she grabbed the phone and hid under the desk. As she stared at the dial pad, she suddenly became confused.

*What was the number again? Who am I calling?*

Her memory felt fuzzy.

She brought her hands to her head, feeling a headache coming on.

Picking up the phone, she once again stared at the dial pad. As she concentrated, she felt the receiver constrict in her hand.

*What in the world?*

Pulling the thing away from her ear, it hissed and lunged at her, latching onto her face. Stifling a scream, she roughly pulled a snake off her.

A burning pain made its way down her face and into her neck. *What the fuck was that?* She trembled as she fought against a surging hysteria.

She couldn't handle snakes. They were the one thing in this world that truly terrified her. And now there was one slithering around in this office. In the dark. With her.

Against her better judgment, she fled, struggling to control her breathing as she cracked open the door and peeked outside. Confident that the coast was clear, she ran into another office on her left. Creeping over to the desk, she tried to hide but froze. She

couldn't see anything, but could hear hissing, and it was getting louder, roaring in her ears.

*What is going on?* She frantically backed away from the desk and in her hurry, tripped over the chair and slammed against the wall.

She could feel the slithering bodies of numerous serpents twisting against her feet. They were wrapping around her, quickly working their way up her body.

Ellie screamed.

Her hands shook as she desperately tried to push hundreds of snakes off of her, but she was failing. The serpents were constricting around her torso, wrapping around her throat.

She found she could no longer think. She was terrified and suffocating.

Without any hesitation, she jumped back into her own body.

Ellie's own eyes flew open, and she took a big breath of relief. She was covered in sweat and hyperventilating as she looked around the room. However, she took comfort in the fact she was back in the bed of her cell.

*What the hell just happened? Does an agent here have the power to control snakes?*

"I'm sure such an agent exists," a sweet and familiar voice called out to her. "But that's not what really happened back there."

The voice startled her before she could hide the reaction, and she jerked. Holding her breath, she tried to force her body to appear weak and feeble once again before anyone could enter her room.

"Oh, honey. There really is no need to continue pretending at this point, is there?" Mystic chuckled. "I have to give it to you, though. Your acting deserves an award. You're in the wrong business."

*Mystic?*

"The one and only!" the woman replied out loud.

Ellie allowed her eyes to briefly wander the room. *Where is she?*

"I'm right here." Her voice became grave. "Right next to you." She bolted up in bed, widely turning to scan around.

The room was brightly lit, and there was no one there.

"Where are you?" she called out, beginning to get angry.

"Right next to you," the voice repeated.

Before she could respond, her head flew back as an invisible force nailed the middle of her face. Sputtering, she scrambled to get out of bed, feeling a river of blood leak out from her nose.

"Where are you?" She backed her way into a corner, hoping to eliminate multiple angles of additional attacks.

"This is how this is going to work, Ellie. You're going to tell me who you really are and who you're working for."

Closing her eyes, she willed her consciousness to jump into one of her other bodies as a means of escape. A few seconds passed before she opened them again.

*It's not working!*

"Who are you?" Mystic demanded. "That little escape trick isn't going to work anymore. You're stuck here with me!

Ellie's head was slammed back into the corner she was crouching in.

"I'll never tell you anything. Go ahead and kill me. I was prepared to die when I came here," she spat.

Her words were rewarded with a hard blow connecting with her mouth.

"Who do you work for?"

*I must protect HAVOC at all costs!*

"What is *HAVOC*?" she forcefully asked as she kicked her in her stomach.

*How is she...* Ellie frantically thought, before speaking. "I don't know! I'm a victim. I'm here because I need help!"

## Chapter 31

*She's lying*, Verity whispered into Mystic's consciousness via the shared psychic connection.

"You can't lie to me!" Mystic roared, her previously hidden form now becoming visible.

*She's trying to figure out how you are reading her mind*, Pry whispered.

Ellie's expression fell into one of horror as she materialized in front of her. She was covered in snakes. They were falling off her and beginning to slither in her direction.

"Keep them away from me!" she screamed, her body forcefully reacting as she stumbled to push herself away.

*Keep the illusions going, Haze. She suffers from Ophidiophobia. Her fear of snakes is practically crippling*, Mystic advised.

*Good job on digging that up!* Haze mentally said in response.

"I can save you from them. All you have to do is tell me what *HAVOC* is."

"No! I don't know. Please! You have to believe me, I don't know anything!" she screeched, entirely hysterical.

She picked up several of the giant snakes near her feet, holding them out as she sauntered over to a hyperventilating Ellie.

"They're... another organization..." she sputtered. "Like *ROOT*..."

*She's telling the truth.*

She held the snakes up in the woman's face. "What is their goal?"

"They... they want war... constant war..."

"Why?"

"Money," Ellie huffed. "Profit."

*She's telling the truth.*

Mystic's tongue flicked out of her mouth. It was shaped like the tongue of a snake. "Who are you, really?"

"Get away from me!"

"Who are you?"

"My codename... is Influence," she rasped. "I was... recently recruited."

"What're you doing with those Ultimate Soldiers, Influence?"

"Testing... we're testing them... to sell... we're building an army," she stammered.

"Sell to who?"

"The... highest... bidder," she choked out. "Please, stop!"

Dropping the snakes, Mystic grabbed the sides of her face. "When you wake up Ellie, you'll no longer have the use of your powers. You'll no longer remember how to use them," she said. However, the voice she used to speak was no longer hers. It was the voice of agent Suggestion. "You're going to be asked questions, and you'll obediently answer them. All of them."

"I'll obediently answer," Ellie repeated, her body now relaxing.

"Now close your eyes. It's time to go to sleep. When you wake up, you'll feel refreshed and at peace. You'll be happy to help all of the agents who come to speak with you. That's your purpose from now on. You exist to help them."

"Yes," the sleeper agent softly said as she closed her eyes. "I will help them," she mumbled before her body went limp.

*She's under, Suggestion advised. The hypnosis won't last forever, but she'll be manageable for at least a month.*

*Thank you, Suggestion, and thank you, everyone.* Mystic watched the illusion of Ellie's holding cell fade to black around her. *I'm going to drop out of her mind now. She's sleeping.*

When Haze killed the illusion, she found herself back in her own cell.

*Vigor, what's your status?*

*I'm releasing Ellie's physical body from my hold right now,* he replied.

Mystic sighed. *Good. We couldn't chance her waking up and breaking out, or trying to kill herself before someone could get to her.*

Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her temples before addressing her small team again. *I do declare this a victory!* she joyfully shouted. *I'm going to drop our connection and try to get in touch with someone who can let the top brass know about this situation.*

A joint, 'understood,' came through the shared mental connection before she cut it off and focused on Alpha Team's second in command.

*Frisk! Frisk, can you hear me? I need your help!*

A few moments passed by before he replied. *You and everyone else tonight! What the fuck?* he roared.

Ignoring the remark, she updated him on everything that happened, starting with what she unconsciously did to Wraith, and finishing with the recent capture of Ellie's consciousness. She didn't spare any detail in her recounting of the entire ordeal.

*You've got to be fucking kidding me! Oh, my God! I have to get a hold of the General!* he shouted frantically.

*Thank you!* she softly said. *We have a dangerous enemy out there. All agents need to be aware of it.*

*It sounds like ROOT has an antithesis. Shit! Alright, I'm on it. Check back in with me in an hour.*

*Understood.*

*Oh, and Mystic? Don't beat yourself up too much about Wraith. We were able to save her. She's recovering in the hospital with Fang now.*

*What? How?* Her adrenaline instantly spiked.

*It's a long story. But, Fang knew something terrible was going to happen to Wraith tonight. He ended up lying to her and sneaking off the base to follow her when she was on a secret mission. Mystic, you must have gotten to her before Fang was able to get back to their apartment,* he said, sighing.

*To save her, we had to find a dog demon with a magical gem that could bring back the dead. This dog demon guy came to the base to help us. He took Wraith's body in his arms while Fang jabbed the magical jewel into her heart, only Fang thought he was sacrificing his own life to save hers. Luckily, it was only a test, and he survived. Everything worked out, and Wraith came back to life,* he rambled.

*What?* she said, utterly confused. *Dog demon? Magical gem?*  
*Yup.*

*That actually... sounds like a dream I once had.* She tried to remember. But, instead of recalling the dream, she remembered something else entirely.

*"He will betray you. When in the arms of another, he will break your very heart. A life must be sacrificed to replace the one taken away."*

*Oh my God! she roared. Ellie got that from my subconscious that day! Holy shit! It all really happened. I completely forgot the dream when I woke up, along with its message.*

*Huh? You okay, Mystic?*

*No! I mean, yes! Don't worry about it! Get a hold of the General. I'll talk to you later!* she said over the roar of her own heartbeat.

With this, she cut the connection.

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General Hush stared at his phone's receiver while he tried to decipher the sheer amount of information Frisk just dumped on him.

Wraith was alive, which he was most thankful for. But, the news of another secret organization being out there, one that was building an army of unstoppable soldiers to sell to the highest bidder, was worrying.

"Are you there?" Frisk grumbled into the stretching silence.

He sighed. "Yes, I'm here."

He felt old beyond his years. How much longer could he keep this up?

"I'm having Quake released, effective immediately. As he didn't, in fact, kill any hostages, and he instead managed to kill a few hidden enemy forces, I no longer have any reason to hold him." He closed his eyes in thought. "But, he will continue to be on inactive status until Inspect, and I figure out what to do with him," he grumbled. "I'm also giving the order to release our psychics. They'll need to debrief the Interrogation Department on their findings so we can have them pull more information from Ellie."

"Sweet!"

"I'll be in touch if I need anything else, Frisk." Hush then hung up the line.



## Chapter 32

Amari watched Renji as he slept, slowly stroking his thick, long hair. The man was utterly exhausted. He sat at her bedside for hours while she drifted in and out of sleep. When she finally awoke, the daylight was streaming into her window, and Renji was curled up on a tiny sliver of her bed.

His head was in her lap, and he was lightly snoring.

*I've put you through so much.*

She took in his appearance. He was still wearing his tactical clothes, and all of his exposed skin was stained with her blood.

*He was the one that found me. I can't imagine how painful that must have been.* She continued to lightly stroke his hair. *He found Hakai and got him to save me. He never once gave up on me, not even death was enough to deter his devotion.* The realization swelled her heart.

"I love you so much," she whispered, wishing she could rip off her constricting tubes and take him into her arms.

A voice softly breaking into her consciousness interrupted her thoughts. *Wraith, are you there?*

*Mystic?*

*Oh, honey, I'm so sorry!* she blurted. *That wasn't me last night! I need you to know that! The person that did that to you wasn't me!*

Amari shut her eyes, trying not to remember the cold look on Mystic's face as she watched her die. *I...*

*Ellie took over my body last night while I was sleeping, Wraith. I didn't protect myself against her as I should, and you paid the price. No, everyone on this team paid the price. I have no memory of what she did to you, but the agent that found me showed me the rifle... she trailed off, struggling to continue. I know I have no right to ask you this, but I hope someday you can forgive me. No apology I can offer you will ever be enough!*

*It's okay. Mystic, you're my friend. I know that wasn't you. Believe me, it's okay.*

*But I...*

*Don't. Just don't,* she softly said.

*How can you be so forgiving? I fucking murdered you!*

*What can I say, it's a gift, it's who I am.* She chuckled. *Where are you?*

*I'm in the hospital's waiting room with the others. We're waiting for Anatomy to give us permission to come in and visit you.*

*You're free?*

*Well, yes. A group of other psychics was imprisoned along with me. We all worked together to bring Ellie down. The Interrogation Department is now questioning her, and she's cooperating thanks to another agent's use of hypnotic suggestion. After the other psychics and I debriefed the Interrogation agents, there was no reason to keep us detained any longer, and I came straight here.*

*Who else is with you?*

*All of Alpha Team, plus Inspect,* Mystic warmly said.

*Quake is there, too?*

*Yes, but he's not on active duty. The General released him last night based upon the fact that he didn't really kill any actual hostages. Inspect and Hush still need to figure out what to do with him,* she said. *We're both prepared for what'll probably happen next. I think Inspect is waiting until you get better so she can talk to you and Frisk about it.*

Amari mentally sighed. *What a mess.*

*It is, but everyone's alive. I'm just grateful for that.*

*Is there anything else I should know?* she curiously asked. *Did you find out anything else about Ellie?*

Mystic hurriedly filled her in on HAVOC.

*An anti-ROOT organization, complete with its own secret agents, many who once worked here? Christ! There could be no bigger threat to us right now!*

Her attention was diverted to Anatomy slowly entering her room. When his eyes met hers, she placed her index finger to her lips and pointed at Renji, signaling for him to be quiet.

*Let me go, Mystic. Anatomy just got here.*

*Will do. Hope to see you soon. Try not to worry yourself too much right now. Just rest. The top brass is already working on the HAVOC situation.*

*Understood,* she said as Mystic cut the connection.

When Anatomy quietly walked over to her, he looked over all her monitors and IV bags.

"How do you feel?" he whispered.

She gave him a thumbs up. "I'm just cold and tired, but not in any pain."

"The rest of your team is in the waiting area. I'll keep them out until Fang wakes up. I'll let the man get some much-needed sleep."

"No need. I'm up," Renji grumbled, yet his eyes remained closed.

"How do you feel? You've been through a lot recently. I'm not sure what going into that state does to your body. But I'd be happy to examine you as well."

"I'm fine. That 'state' you're talking about doesn't harm me. I'm just tired from all the stress. Once I eat and get some sleep, and I'll be back to normal. My kind tends to bounce back pretty quickly."

"Then why don't you try to get some more rest, and I'll have some food brought down for the two of you."

"I'll rest when she's able to go back home," he huffed. "When do you think you'll be able to release her?"

"I'm not sure yet. That all depends on her."

He nuzzled into Amari's lap.

"Since you're both here, do you want to share any of the information you were able to find out from your wolf demon friend, Wraith?"

"Might as well before some kind of crazy distraction rears its ugly head and pulls me away again." She recalled the details from her conversation with Roukan.

"When a wolf demon pair accepts one another other as mates, pheromones are released that connect them by scent. Behavior in mated wolf demon couples is balanced by these pheromones, which are subconsciously and continuously exchanged. It's a form of silent communication. Obviously, I'm not a wolf demon, so I'm not able to provide Fang with the balance his body is so desperately seeking. This is what's causing him to... be on edge all the time."

Renji grunted, apparently too tired to argue.

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Anatomy hurriedly pulled a small notepad out of his pocket and scrambled to take down some notes. "Humans do have pheromones, and we naturally secrete them."

"I know, but they are in no way potent enough," Wraith supplied. "When Fang and I have..." She cleared her throat. "When Fang and I are intimate or are sharing a tender moment, or when he's being possessive or protective over me, the scent that rolls off of him is *incredible*. It fills the room. It smells so sexy and masculine to us females, but it smells absolutely dreadful to any males in the vicinity," she advised. "If that speaks to the level of scent his body requires from me, then there's just no way I can physically do that. And that's just his marking scent. Who knows what other scents he's putting out all day that I can't even decipher."

*Maybe Fang's scent is due to a mix of environmental and situational drivers that stimulate his testosterone levels?* Anatomy thought as he processed her explanation.

He had a hunch.

"When's the last time you ovulated Wraith?"

"Huh? Um. I have no idea. I did have my period last week," she offhandedly said.

"What day did it start?"

"Monday."

"Eight days ago," he stated as he wrote it down. "So, you'll ovulate anywhere between Thursday and next Monday."

"If you say so."

"You are on birth control?"

"Yes, I get the shot every three months. Why?"

"I have an idea about all this. I'm going to schedule a meeting with some other scientists to see if they agree, and hopefully, they can help me come up with a simple solution. We might be able to create a drug of some sort to enhance the potency of your own body's natural pheromones, or we might be able to create a synthetic scent for you."

"A drug or a synthetic scent?" Fang repeated, his eyes still closed.

"Yes, something that could either amplify Wraith's natural hormonal scent fluctuations, or a liquid version we could create

based off of her own scent. Something she could spray, like a perfume."

"How would you go about doing any of those things?" Wraith wondered.

"We're certainly going to have to collect some hormone samples from you Thursday through Monday." Anatomy eyed Fang. *Please don't ask me 'how' while he's in the room*, he prayed.

"How are you going to do that?" she curiously asked.

*God help us*. He paused. "One of the *female* gynecologists here is going to collect it from you. A *female* doctor. A *female* gynecologist," he stressed.

He silently cursed when Fang cracked open an eye.

"Why?"

"Because for the next week, Wraith's estrogen levels will be at their highest, which will provide us with samples of the hormone. If we're able to catch the day of ovulation, which we should, we'll also have a sample of her progesterone when it's at its peak as well."

He once again closed his eye. "Marking scents are different from that."

*Whew!* "I get that, but they're most likely driven by natural and reaction-based hormonal fluctuations. We need her hormones to lay the foundation for our research."

"Sounds simple enough," Wraith thoughtfully said.

"Great! Oh, and... we need the sample to be untainted so, I'm going to need you to abstain from any sexual activity until the final sample is collected on Monday."

This time Fang opened both eyes and frowned.

"If it makes you feel any better, she's not well anyway. She needs to rest."

He held his breath as he waited for the wolf demon's reaction. He felt relieved when the man's face softened, and he once again closed his eyes, nuzzling his face into Wraith's lap.

"I need to finish the rest of my rounds, but I'll be back soon to check on you. I'll have food sent down to you two as well."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

He walked to the door. As he pulled it open to make his leave, the entire Alpha Team, who apparently pressed themselves against the door to eavesdrop, fell at his feet.

"What in the world?" He hurried to back away from the sea of bodies spilling into the room. "What the hell is the matter with you people? I told you to stay in the waiting area!" he shouted, losing his patience.

"Quake, get off of me! I can't breathe!" Terrain shouted. "I just got out of the hospital, and you're going to put me right back in it!"

"Shut up, you idiot, you're in the hospital right now!" Frisk chided. "You never left it, to begin with."

"That's not what I fucking meant!"

"Trace your hand! Move your hand!" Mystic shrieked. "No! The other hand!" she shouted, becoming furious.

"I'm not trying to touch anything, I'm trying to get up!" he shouted defensively.

"Don't grope Mystic!" Quake spat.

"Enough! All of you get out!" Anatomy screamed at the moving pile of bodies. "You're bothering the patients here!"

"*Your* screaming is probably bothering them a whole lot more!" Inspect's voice loudly boomed from down the hallway.

He watched on in horror as she walked over the slithering bodies of her Alpha Team, not sparing them a second glance, as she entered the room.

She was then greeted by the shocked expressions of both Wraith and Fang as they watched the idiotic scene playing out before them. Both were sitting up wide-eyed on the bed with their jaws hanging slack.

"Agent Wraith!" Inspect ran over to the Alpha Team leader.

*Oh, to hell with it!* Anatomy internally grumbled as he took a cue from Inspect. He furiously marched right over Alpha Team to get out of the door.

"Ow!"

"Hey!"

"My spleen!"

"Terrain, call me later," he called back over his shoulder, as he stomped his way down the hallway.

## Chapter 33

Amari struggled to pull her head away from Inspect's bosom. The woman was hugging her head as the rest of her body was tied up in tubes and wires. "Are you fucking kidding me right now? Were you guys listening? How dare you!"

"We weren't listening! We were leaning on the door waiting for Anatomy to leave," Frisk angrily said. "Who'd want to hear about your damn period anyway?"

"You *were* listening! You, *asshole!*" She felt her face turn a deep shade of red. "Get out!"

"No! I will not get out! I haven't had a damn chance to see you at all. I've done nothing but run around like a lunatic for the past twelve hours. You'll see me whether you like it or not, agent Wraith. Stop being so selfish!"

Renji rubbed his temples and lay back down on her lap, forcibly shutting his eyes and covering his ears with his hands.

"Here, Wraith." Trace approached the bed, holding out a large bag. "Mystic and I brought your cell phone, your laptop, and some clothes. We brought clothes for Fang, too." He smiled. "And we cleaned up your apartment!"

"How do you feel?" Inspect interrupted. "Frisk filled us in on what happened."

"I'm just tired. I still feel cold, but it's slowly going away. I'm not in any pain," she mumbled into the woman's chest.

"That's good," Quake softly said.

Amari noticed he was wearing civilian clothes. "It's good to see you again."

Terrain pulled over a chair. "So, I heard the crazy prophecy came true!"

"What prophecy?" she muttered, finally escaping from Inspect's headlock.

"The one about Fang betraying you and breaking your heart!" she exclaimed. "It's so damn romantic! Knowing Fang's reputation, when I first heard it, I thought it meant he'd surely cheat on you, but this way is so much better!"

"Huh?"

"He will betray you..." she said in a low and spooky voice. "In the arms of another, he will break your heart..." She wiggled her fingers in the air for effect.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you sure you're feeling well?"

Renji bolted up into a sitting position and stared at her. "It really did happen." His voice was full of wonder. "Ellie was right."

"Ellie took that from *me*. She stole that from my subconscious. I had a dream that all of this would happen. But as I always do, I forgot all about it. She unearthed it when she touched me on Hashima Island. When she saw you, Wraith, she repeated the message," Mystic huffed.

"What the hell are you people talking about?"

"Fang lied to you. He betrayed you! He stabbed a jewel into your heart to save you while another guy holding you," Trace explained.

"He thought he was sacrificing his life to return yours," Frisk chimed in, completing the rest of the prophecy.

"You, *what?*" she hissed as she stared at Renji.

The room became silent.

Frisk sighed. "Come on, everyone. Let's go wait in the hall again." When no one moved, he stomped his foot, making everyone jump. "Get out. That's an order!"

"I don't take orders from you," Inspect roughly said as she crossed her arms against her chest.

He solved the problem by quickly swinging her over his shoulder. The woman actually laughed and surrendered without putting up a fight.

"We'll be back in an hour. Do bring her up to speed, Fang. You really do have to work on your communication skills."

He and the rest of the team exited the room, loudly slamming the door behind them.

"What did you do?" Amari asked, her voice dropping into one of worry.

He sighed. "There was a test, only I didn't know it was a test."

"What?"

"When Hakai tried to bring you back, he said he wasn't able to because a portion of your soul was mixed with mine. He said that



because the two souls couldn't be separated, he wouldn't be able to call your spirit back from the afterlife without also pulling my spirit out of me, killing me. But, it wasn't real, it was only a test so the Anamnesis Terrene could measure my devotion to you."

"So you told him to take it, didn't you?" she realized, not at all surprised, knowing she'd have done the same.

"Yes, I did. Of course, I did," he lovingly said. He leaned forward to place a gentle kiss on her lips. "Instead of taking my life, the jewel gave me back yours, along with a very special gift..." He studied her face.

"The gift of time. Your time," she finished.

His golden eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"Kichi was telling me about it on the other side. The Anamnesis Terrene gave her half of Hakai's time. She was able to stay by his side for over four hundred years," she mumbled. "So this means—"

"You can stay by mine as well." The tips of Renji's fangs peeked out from his upper lip as he widely smiled.

Her hands shot out and wrapped around his neck, pulling him to her in a firm hug. "I can't believe it," she whispered against him. "I can always be with you. We can have a real future together."

She struggled to catch her breath. She couldn't remember a time where she felt more relieved.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" She nuzzled into his chest and embraced the beautiful, masculine smell that was washing over her.

"Yes, I actually do." His hand glided under her chin, lifting her face to brush his lips against hers.

Renji's breath lightly tickled her lips at the contact before he slowly sunk his mouth onto hers.

She didn't hesitate to open for him, allowing his tongue to gently dance with hers. Before she could stop, her hands swept over his Teflon armor. They continued their trail down his body, coasting over his groin before sweeping down his legs as he knelt over her. She felt a low rumble from deep within his chest as he hurriedly broke away from her.

"You're hurt," he said, panting as he tried to regain his composure.

Ignoring him, she tried to remove his Teflon armor.

Grabbing her wrists, he gently pushed them away. "Amari, you *are* hurt," he gravely said as he then sniffed the air. His head suddenly swayed in the direction of the door. "And everyone's right outside the door *again!*"

"We can be quiet."

He intensely studied her before his gaze prominently fell to all the tubes coming out of her body. "Not happening."

She blinked and casually reached for the nurse's call tucked by her side. She pushed the button and waited a few seconds before a voice came through.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to take a shower. Can someone please come in and disconnect me from all these machines?"

"I'll be right in," the woman answered.

Renji curiously looked at her as he moved off the bed. "What are you doing?"

She didn't get a chance to answer, her attention was instead drawn by the door opening. Before the nurse closed the door behind her, she saw the rest of her team peeking in the doorway.

Approaching her bedside, the nurse took a look at all of the connections hanging above her. "I need to make sure you can walk. If you do well, I'll come in and help wash you."

"I already have someone who can help me, but thanks!" She pointed to Renji. "He's my husband," she proudly said, trying out the new word to describe him.

Her mate stared at her, his head tilting to the side as he obviously worked to process the human term she just used to describe her relationship with him.

The nurse glanced at him. "Oh, alright." In another moment, she set to work disconnecting the tubes. "You will need to keep the saline IV bag. All the other stuff can go." She removed all the IV connections plugging Amari's hands, wrists, and arms, save for one. "When you're finished, I'll have to reconnect you to the heart monitor."

"Sounds good."

"Now, turn to me and stand." She pulled a mobile IV stand to her side and connected the lone saline bag to it. "I want you to take

your time. We're going to need to walk a little bit. Lean on me if you need help."

Amari complied. She slowly slung her legs over the side of her bed and stood up.

"Do you feel lightheaded at all?"

"No."

"Okay, then. Show me how you walk."

She walked around the room several times.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," she honestly said.

"Good. I'll go and set up the shower for you. Do you have a change of clothes? If not, I can bring you a fresh gown."

"I do!" She pointed to the bag Mystic and Trace prepared.

"Wonderful." The nurse looked over to Renji. "Would you mind standing here with her while I get her bag and start the shower?"

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Renji nodded and took to his mate's side, wrapping his arm around her waist and holding her to him.

As the nurse readied the shower, Amari threw him a devilish look.

"Problem solved," she whispered as she seductively looked up at him.

Peering down at her, he tried to ignore the sweet scent of her arousal flooding his nose. "But what about the sample they need?" he sputtered, trying to make his brain work.

"Today is Monday, and that little project starts on *Thursday*," she whispered, apparently quite pleased with herself.

"All set!" the nurse called out, unintentionally interrupting the moment.

"Great! I'll call if I need anything!" Amari shouted over her shoulder as she dragged her IV pole and Renji into the bathroom and quickly slammed the door behind them.

"What the..." the nurse stammered before she took the hint and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, Renji was slammed into the wall, and Amari was on him. She wasted no time in jumping him, her

arms wrapping roughly around his neck and her legs around his waist. Her tongue hungrily invaded his mouth, twisting against his and only sparing a moment to run across his sharp bottom teeth.

The scent of her need was thick in the air, deep and musky, unabashedly communicating her desire.

He struggled to keep up with the desperate pace she was setting without roughly handling her. "Slow down," he pleaded, his voice husky as he broke away for air.

Ignoring him, she untied and unsnapped the connections holding his armor in place. She was already trying to pull his vest off before she was able to entirely pull the armor away.

"Baby, slow down. Take it easy—"

Holding his eyes, Amari partially released the tight hold of her legs from around his waist and slid down his body, stopping at his massive arousal and grinding her core against it.

Throwing his head back, he groaned, and his hands sprang to life. Making quick work of casting away the shell of his armor, he pulled his shirt up over his head and chucked it into a corner. His hands then slid down her back before coming to a rest on her ass, firmly cupping the soft cheeks as he pulled her into him, adding pressure to the grind of her hips.

\*\*\*

She needed him. Amari desperately needed to physically feel every inch of his body pressed up against hers. The contact was reassuring, but she wanted to be mindlessly lost in everything him. She wanted to escape to a world where they were the only two in existence, and he was the only one who knew how to take her there.

As Renji supported her weight, she hurried to unsnap and pull off her flimsy hospital gown. Once free, she set to work on unfastening his pants. She pushed the irritant fabric, along with the band of his boxers down below his hips. When finally out of the way, she stroked her hand over his throbbing erection and celebrated the velvety and warm feel of his sensitive skin as she wrapped her hand around him. Slowly pumping, she dragged her thumb over the head of his member on each upward thrust.

She was grateful when Renji quickly cut away the sides of her panties with his claws. The moment he pulled the thin barrier away, she released her hold on him and recaptured his lips. Positioning his tip against her slick folds, she could feel his hungry arousal twitching against her, begging for entrance.

As their tongues danced, she rolled her hips, forcing him deep inside of her.

The abrupt connection had them groaning loudly as they struggled to find a way to pull each other closer.

Breaking the kiss, Renji wrapped one arm around her back, his free hand tangling in her hair. Gently pulling her head back, he arched her. The action raised her creamy, white breasts up to his face, and he hungrily took one of her tightened pink nipples into his mouth. He greedily pulled on it with his tongue before grazing the hardened bud against his sharp lower teeth.

Amari jerked at the sensation, rewarding him with an involuntary clench around his cock.

Shuddering, he transferred his attention to her other breast, gently kissing the nipple before taking it into his mouth. He sucked down against her hard, before flicking the tip of her nipple with his tongue, sending chills into her body.

Desperate, she frantically pumped against him. The musky aroma of his marking scent, combined with what he was doing to her chest, was slowly driving her mad. She felt him release his hold on her hair to caress her right breast, softly squeezing and pinching before capturing her once again with his mouth. A low growl was rumbling in his chest.

*He's getting close.*

As if reading her mind, he suddenly turned, switching their positions. Anchoring her back against the wall, he pinned her in place with his chest. Pushing her thighs back, he spread her completely, his hands firmly coming to rest under her knees.

Dipping down into her neck, he began to suck and bite on the tender place between her throat and her collarbone. He paused only for a moment as if to steady himself before he began to pump slowly. The spread position she was in allowed him to reach deep inside of her. And after each heavy thrust, he firmly pressed his groin against the center of her pleasure and rotated his hips.

Amari felt as though her body was on fire.

"I want to look at you," she demanded through rapid breaths, quickly finding herself to be on the edge. "Please."

Laying a trail of kisses up her neck, he slowly raised his head to look down at her.

She released his hair from its ponytail. And as it cascaded down around them, she cupped his cheek and lost herself in the sight of his face.

He was hungrily looking down at her, his red, glowing eyes almost hidden behind hooded lids. He was covered in a layer of sweat, and his mouth was parted as he heavily panted. His sharp canine teeth rested down against his chin, and his black hair swept over them, enhancing the shadows making up the masculine and prominent features of his face.

He was the living definition of power, ferocity, sex, and love, and of all things wild and Earth.

And he was forever hers.

The knowledge was just as explosive as her climax. And when she fell over the edge, her eyes held his as he joined her.

As their shared orgasm overtook them, Amari's spiritual powers engulfed them, setting the room ablaze in bright, purple light.

It was like nothing she ever felt before. Not only could she feel the waves of pleasure washing over her, but she could feel as they coasted through Renji, too. The sensation was physical and spiritual and just incredible.

Groaning loudly, he dropped his forehead down against hers. He allowed her to watch his expression tense as he continued to pump into her, filling her over and over again. When he finished, he dropped his full weight against her as they both struggled to catch their breath.

They stayed this way, lost in the feel of each other for some time. Amari only attempted to move when she heard what sounded like Renji purring against her, his body held within her warm, glowing light.

He broke into a smile and slowly opened his eyes. "You are amazing," he whispered. Lowering his head, he took her mouth in a loving kiss.

"I know!"

He laughed heartily. "So conceited." Slowly releasing her legs, he scooped her up into his arms, dragging her IV pole behind them. "Time for that shower."

Carefully carrying her under the flowing water, he took his time to wash them, showering her with kisses and loving caresses while he did.

"So your 'husband,' huh?" he said through a big toothy grin as he rinsed her long hair.

"Same thing as a mate, no?"

"Yes, and no. Mating is an instinctual pairing, it's something that happens naturally and ends naturally as well. Marriage, well, that's all based on human rules and vows, isn't it?"

"It's based on love. Well, most of the time. But, in theory, it's supposed to be based on love and commitment."

He glanced down at her left hand for a moment before he focused his attention back on her face. "Is that something you want, Amari?"

She smiled. "I think we're way past that, don't you? I don't need a ceremony or a ring for you to be my husband. I've already vowed myself to you many times over. I love you with all my heart, and I'll stay by your side in this world, and wait for you in the next if I have to."

"I love you, too, and I vow to do the same. I'll always be by your side, in this world and in the next. I am yours," he swore, once again capturing her lips.

## Author's Note

If you enjoyed this story, **please** let me know by writing a positive review of "Revived by Diana Leston," on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Google Books, or iBooks.

Hey! Don't roll your eyes at me, damn it! I can see you!

Think of it this way... You've just taken a journey with me, one that I've put a lot of love and effort into. If you liked the ride and found that you were entertained throughout, then reward me with what would be the equivalent of a drink – review the actual book! This helps my sales and allows me to continue writing. A review can be as simple as, "**I enjoyed this!**" or "**I'd highly recommend!**"

If you can't swing it, I'll happily settle for a blog subscription. My author page can be found at <https://DianaLeston.com>. Subscribe to the blog to receive updates on upcoming works for this series!

All my love,

*-Diana*



## About The Author

Diana Leston grew up in NY and has been an avid fan of reading fiction since she was a young child. In 2018, mostly on a whim, she tried her hand at writing the type of stories that she wanted to read.

After sharing her work on a small free readership platform and receiving fan encouragement, she decided to publish her works – several multi-genre fantasy/action-adventure/romance novels about gifted secret agents and their quest for the protection of world peace.

Diana is a married mother of two young children and works in the advertising/marketing industry. She is a firm believer that everyone, regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, and species, is beautiful. Everything and everyone in this world is unique, and therefore, exactly how they were meant to be. This belief of tolerance and understanding is prominent in all of her works.

Her private interests include fantasy and anime, and all things Japanese!

Read more at <https://DianaLeston.com>.

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